BLACK BOX AND BLUE SCREEN: READERLY ENTRAPMENT AND PROJECTION IN *PALE FIRE* AND *HOUSE OF LEAVES.*

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Abstract

In many respects Vladimir Nabokov's 1962 novel *Pale Fire* and Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves*, first published in 2000, are strikingly similar texts. Indeed, Danielewski's novel can profitably be read as a contemporary re-working of Nabokov's archetypal metafictional model. However, where Danielewski constructs his text as an open-work or 'blue screen' onto which the reader is invited to attach any meaning that they see fit, Nabokov quite explicitly constructs his novel as an infernal 'black box' designed to confuse and entrap the reader and enforce his control over the text and its meaning. Nabokov's novel is fundamentally author-directed, while Danielewski's novel is expressly reader-oriented. Reading *Pale Fire* through the lens of *House of Leaves* allows for a radical renegotiation of the Nabokovian text. Danielewski's novel, I argue, allows us to recognize the points of instability latent in the unique structure of Nabokov's novel, and thus open up the text beyond Nabokov's attempted closure and thereby pave the way for new, innovative and creative readings.

Introduction

When asked if Nabokov's *Pale Fire* served as a major influence on the formal arrangement of *House of Leaves* Mark Danielewski had the following to say: "Considering that I have yet to read *Pale Fire*, I would have to say not enormously, although I was of course aware of what Nabokov had managed to do in the book" ("Haunted House" 114). Danielewski's professed ignorance of the particulars of Nabokov's novel is surprising, for *House of Leaves* and *Pale Fire* are in many respects uncannily similar. Indeed, Danielewski's novel can profitably be read as a contemporary re-working and transmutation of Nabokov's archetypal metafictional model. Both novels present themselves as a commentary of a fictional work. In *Pale Fire*, we have John Shade's poem "Pale Fire" which is commented on and annotated by Charles Kinbote. Kinbote is an opportunist who purloins Shade's poem after the poet's death; he produces a willful misreading of the poem that effectively becomes an autobiographical text telling his own story. Similarly, in *House of Leaves* we have Zampanò's text "The Navidson Record", a hilariously inflated critical explication of a documentary film of the same title. After Zampanò's death, his manuscript is, in turn, annotated, edited, and commentated on by Johnny Truant, who, like Kinbote, takes this opportunity to append to the text a series of footnotes that constitute long personal digressions rather than anything representing an objective and scholarly approach. Both works, then, fold back on themselves intratexturally, as one part of the novel purports to read another. As such, the subject matter of both novels is the interpretive process itself.

"Self-conscious" novels - rather than presenting themselves as windows of transparent language that unproblematically give out on to a mimetically faithful representation of 'reality'- foreground their status as fictional artifice. Within the tradition of the novel, this strain of self-consciousness has a long history and has been variously categorized and defined. One of the first major critical studies of the subject, Robert Alter's *Partial Magic: the Novel as Self-Conscious Genre* (1975), positions *Don Quixote* as the archetype of reflexive form and traces a subsequent lineage of Cervantic self-conscious offspring running from Sterne, Fielding and Diderot in the eighteenth century through to

such modern writers as Borges, Nabokov and Barth. Alter reads these novelist's self-consciousness and lucid playfulness as symptomatic of an awareness of a dialectical incommensurability between fiction and reality, a recognition which fuels skepticism toward all fictional codes and conventions, and in particular the dominant tradition of literary realism, a form that found its apotheosis in the works of the great realists and bourgeois fabulists of the nineteenth century.

For Alter, self-conscious fictions playfully flaunt their own artifice in order to point up the artificiality inherent in all novelistic representation, and in doing so polemically position themselves in subversive opposition to the "realistic" novel, the underlying assumption of which he describes as a "tantalizing contradiction in terms" (*Partial Magic* x). By exposing the artifice inherent in all fictional codes, self-conscious novels demonstrate how what we take to be "realism" is itself merely a corpus of conventions and stylistic devices that over time have come to generate an aura of "authenticity" and mimetic faithfulness. Thus, the ultimate motive of self-consciousness, Alter argues, is to delineate the limits of artistic representation – and by extension human imagination and consciousness – in the face of an unrepresentable reality.

While Alter's dialectical argument posits an unbridgeable ontological fissure between the products of the imagination and objective "reality", in *Narcissistic Narrative: the Metafictional Paradox* (1980), Linda Hutcheon undertakes to demonstrate how such a dualism is impossible to sustain, shrewdly pointing out that "[r]eading and writing belong to the processes of 'life' as much as they do to those of 'art'" (*Narcissistic Narrative* 5). For Hutcheon, the term metafiction specifically denotes novels that are not only self-conscious but also highly *self-reflexive*, works that foreground their status as textual constructs in order to reflect and interrogate the narratological and textual processes of composition. Alter's argument focused on a constellation of ontological and epistemological issues surrounding the disparity he perceives between fiction and reality. Hutcheon's critical framework, on the other hand, focuses on a dialectic within literary tradition itself – the serial progression of two rival but occasionally overlapping forms of novelistic mimesis: the 'realist' mode or what she calls the "mimesis of product" novel,

and the modern self-reflexive novel, which through its tendency to interrogate its own genesis and compositional strategies reflects not so much "product" as "process mimesis" (5). For Hutcheon, the 'process mimesis' novel forces the reader to engage intellectually and effectively with the text in such a way that the distinction Alter draws between "art" and "life" is collapsed; such texts highlight the fact that acts of reading, writing and interpretation belong equally to the realms of "art" and "life."

The reconfiguration of mimesis on this new level ostensibly affords the reader a view over the novelist's shoulder into the dynamic and ongoing *process of writing*. This focus on the *performative* act of writing implicitly undermines the traditional realist conception of the work as an ostensibly faithful reproduction or mirror-like transcription of a stable, pre-existent reality. Hutcheon rightly argues that this "decentralizing of the traditional realistic interest in fiction, away from the story told to the story telling, to the functioning of language and of larger diegetic structures" is not – as critics of the F. R. Leavis persuasion have often lamented – an anti-mimetic rupture within a predominately representational tradition, a severance of the novel from its connection to "life" symptomatic of its sad decline into irrelevance (35). Pointing out that diegesis is part of the Aristotelian concept of mimesis, Hutcheon views the nineteenth-century mode of realism as more a "reductive limitation of novelistic mimesis" (5), more a "period-concept," than the novel's paradigmatic form: "[t]he generic terms of reference in metafiction are still novelistic; auto-representation is still representation" (6). While the traditional realist text positions the reader as a passive consumer of an pre-constructed fictional world, the reader of modern metafiction on the other hand, through the act of negotiating and "concretizing" the text, is forcibly involved "intellectually, creatively, and perhaps even affectively in a human act that is very real, that is, in fact, a kind metaphor of his daily efforts to 'make sense' of experience" (30).

Metafictional texts, therefore, both play with their readers and seduce them into a more active engagement with the reading process; affirming and foregrounding their own narrative and/or linguistic structure, they paradoxically enrich our sense of "reality" as itself a process of decoding and interpretation. Overt narrative and linguistic narcissism,

however, also forces the reader to acknowledge the patently fictive status of the text and the represented world. As such, the text's overt foregrounding of its fictionality and the creative response such recognition invokes constitutes what Hutcheon calls the dual consciousness or "paradox of the reader", complementing the text's paradoxical focus both *inward* on narcissistic self-scrutiny and *outward* in appeal to the reader. For Hutcheon, these two paradoxes are the central and defining feature of modern metafiction and the readerly response such texts demand. The focus on the writing process in metafiction broadens

> to include a parallel process of equal importance to the text's actualization – that of *reading*. The reader is explicitly or implicitly forced to face his responsibility toward the text, that is, toward the novelistic world he is creating through the accumulated fictive referents of literary language. As the novelist actualizes the world of his imagination through words, so the reader – from those same words – manufactures in reverse a literary universe that is as much his creation as it is the novelist's. This near equation of the acts of reading and writing is one of the concerns that sets modern metafiction apart from previous novelistic self-consciousness (27).

The typology Hutcheon develops breaks metafiction down into works that are either "diegetically" or "linguistically" self-conscious. A "diegetically" self-conscious text presents itself as narrative, as assemblage of novelistic codes; a "linguistically" self-conscious text as language, an assemblage of marks and inscriptions upon a page. Hutcheon further distinguishes an 'overt' and 'covert' form of each of these two types: "[o]vertly narcissistic texts reveal their self-awareness in explicit thematizations or allegorizations of their diegetic or linguistic identity within the texts themselves," while in the covert form "this process is internalized, actualized; such a text is self-reflective but not necessarily self-conscious" (7). Hutcheon's theorization of metafiction is a good point of entry into the two novel's under consideration here – Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire* and Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves*. Both these novels are overtly narcissistic texts that exhibit a high degree of diegetic and linguistic self-consciousness.

Pale Fire has proven to be a consistently problematic text for critical interpretation. In Nabokov's novel, the relationship between reader and writer is fundamentally antagonistic. As we shall see, the struggle for control between creative writer and critic/reader forms not only the subject matter but the very structural principle of the novel. Indeed, Nabokov is famous for what Maurice Couturier calls "authorial tyranny": the author, as 'creator', claiming supreme control over the text and its meaning. In *Pale Fire*, Nabokov constructs an enigmatic novel that is purposefully difficult for his reader to negotiate. In doing so, he not only affirms his own tyrannical hold over the novel but also guards against the invasion of the reader whose own attempts to command the text destroy, for Nabokov, its delicate tissue. Fundamentally, then, Nabokov strives to create an impenetrable textual 'black box' that denies readerly interpretation, thus preserving his own authority as the only key to unlocking the novel's secrets.

This is primarily achieved through the authorship riddle that the novel poses the reader. The large number of echoes and correspondences between Kinbote's and Shade's texts inevitably draw the reader to question who is responsible for creating the novel's parts: Shade or Kinbote. That Shade and Kinbote do indeed represent two separate characters, or whether there is in fact a single author creating both the novel's parts remains ambiguous. This authorial conundrum has plagued critics since the novel's publication. The search for a definitive controlling voice within the novel predictably leads back to Nabokov himself as originator of the fictional text. Unable by themselves to elucidate the 'true' meaning of the novel, readers are forced to return to Nabokov for answers. In this way, Nabokov's novel is fundamentally author-directed.

Conversely, Danielewski's novel is expressly reader-oriented. Danielewski deliberately fills his text with epistemological paradoxes and aporias so that everything in *House of Leaves* operates as an interpretive challenge to the reader. But unlike Nabokov's novel, these conundrums force the reader to work within the text, making any number of 'undecidable' interpretive decisions, each of which ultimately imbricates them in the process of generating meaning. Like Johnny, the reader is invited to enter into

Danielewski's authorial game, supplementing the text with their own unique voice, thus generating new readings. Rather than attempting to fix the meaning of the novel, Danielewski opens the text to further reinscription and reinterpretation. *House of Leaves* therefore necessarily remains a work in progress, continually being re-shaped by the reader.

In this thesis, I read *Pale Fire* alongside *House of Leaves*, setting up a dialogue between the two texts. I argue that Danielewski's novel can help reveal the points of instability that reside within the unique structure of *Pale Fire*, and by extension the blind-spots of previous Nabokovian criticism, thus opening the novel to new *disobedient* interpretations. One of the main ways this is done is by destabilizing Nabokov's authorship riddle. That is, by demonstrating, using Danielewski, how the very structure of Nabokov's novel renders null and void any definitive answer to the authorship tease of whether Shade or Kinbote wrote the book. Essentially, my thesis is itself structured like the novels I deal with. Just as Kinbote mis-reads Shade's poem, and Johnny mis-reads Kinbote's, what I am trying to do here is mis-read or, more accurately, re-read Nabokov by using Danielewski's novel. Through this very means what I hope to do is move *Pale Fire* beyond its author-determined point of closure, and open it up to a future-directed and reader-oriented process of interpretation.

commentary (significantly, also called "The Navidson Record") by an enigmatic Borges-like character known only as Zampanò, who is fond of mixing real and fictional sources in an attempt to provide a sense of erudition to his work. This exhaustive critical opus forms the "main" text of Danielewski's novel and functions as the lens through which the reader views the events of the film.

Between Zampanò and the reader is twenty-five-year-old poet and tattoo parlor apprentice Johnny Truant, who functions in many ways as the reader's surrogate in the novel. By chance, Johnny comes into possession of Zampanò's unfinished manuscript following the old man's death. Although scattered over thousands of scraps of paper, the manuscript nevertheless exerts a strange hold over Johnny, who begins the arduous labor of assembling it into a coherent order. In the process, he adds his own layer of footnotes to the text's already densely footnoted margins. More than simply glossing foreign passages and annotating references, Johnny's notes grow into long personal digressions, sordid tales of his empty sexual encounters and drug experiences in the L.A. club scene. A chilling story of alienation and madness slowly unfolds that subtly echoes and thematically parallels the events of the Navidson documentary. Finally, Zampanò and Truant's work is brought together and published in book form by a group of unnamed "editors" who add their own further notes to the text. In the early chapters of the novel Zampanò's text, presented in Times font, occupies the centre of the page, with Truant's "commentary" appearing in Courier font in the margin at the bottom. As the book progresses, however, this initial layout becomes increasingly more complex and the division between the two texts less easily identifiable.

What the reader of *House of Leaves* is presented with, then, is a scene of multiplied writings and readings, a palimpsest of densely overlaid inscriptions. Whereas the realist novel strives to repress its own materiality in order to offer the reader immediate access to "the real," what we have in Danielewski's novel is a chain of opaque material inscriptions, an interminable redoubling of text upon text. This redoubling undermines the ideal transparency of realism is favor of a reflexive interrogation into the very conditions of novelistic representation, subverting the notion of a stable, pre-existent

"reality" "out there" waiting to be portrayed and explained. Moreover, as Johnny reveals in his introduction, the Navidson documentary, which ostensibly set in motion the chain of supplementary inscriptions, may be nothing more than a hoax or chimera:

> [A]s I fast discovered, Zampanò's entire project is about a film which doesn't even exist. You can look, I have, but no matter how long you search you will never find The Navidson Record in theatres or video stores. Furthermore, most of what's said by famous people has been made up. I tried contacting all of them. Those that took the time to respond told me they had never heard of Will Navidson let alone Zampanò (xix-xx).

What is more, Johnny also reports in the introduction that Zampanò was "blind as a bat," and hence physically unable to perform the acts of description and analysis that nevertheless constitute the very substance of his commentary (xxi). Yet, despite both his handicap and the apparent non-existence of *The Navidson Record*, Zampanò offers an exhaustive critical explication of the film, and his words in turn form the stimulus for later commentators to produce further readings. In effect, then, Zampanò creates the film as a hypothetical object of study within the represented world at the same time as he merely purports to analyze it.

Furthermore, Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory have drawn attention to the fact that Zampanò is also the main character in Frederico Fellini's 1954 film *La Strada*, thus making him a fictional character within the fictional world of the novel. As they point out, once we recognize that Danielewski has "borrowed" this character from another work of fiction our perception of the novel's narrative structure is radically altered:

> Once we assume that the Zampanò who wrote the novel in *House of Leaves* is literally the character Fellini created in *La Strada*, we are forced to revise our assumptions concerning the status of the world projected within Johnny Truant's framing narrative. That is, if Zampanò is only an imaginary character existing in a work of art, then everything else in the framing tale involving Johnny –

> including his mother, his (re)construction of the manuscript, and everything relating to the world in which this framing tale occurs – would necessarily also have to be "unreal," even in the sense of the imaginary "real" posited in most works of fiction ("Haunted House" 126).

In short, the fictional and the real are so tightly enmeshed in *House of Leaves* that, as Mark B. N. Hansen puts it, "any effort to mark their separation is simply, for reasons of principle, impossible" ("The Digital Topography of Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves*" 601).

As if in a bid to fill the referential void that lies at the heart of his project, Zampanò produces literally hundreds of pages of detailed commentary on the Navidson film. That is, rather than resulting in simple absence, the apparent non-existence of *The Navidson Record* gives rise to a whole array of supplemental inscriptions that come to stand in for the striking absence of the referent itself. As Johnny's description of Zampanò's manuscript makes plain, this process necessarily results in an unruly proliferation of texts:

> Endless snarls of words, sometimes twisting into meaning, sometimes into nothing at all, frequently breaking apart, always branching off into other pieces I'd come across later – on old napkins, the tattered edges of an envelope, once even on the back of a postage stamp; everything and anything but empty; each fragment completely covered with the creep of years and years of ink pronouncements; layered, crossed out, amended; handwritten, typed; legible, illegible; impenetrable, lucid; torn, stained, scotch taped; some bits crisp and clean, others faded, burnt or folded and refolded so many times the creases have obliterated whole passages of god knows what – sense? truth? deceit? (xvii).

In his turn, Johnny not only edits Zampanò's manuscript into a coherent document by restoring deletions, annotating foreign words, and arbitrating between competing passages, he seems impelled to add his own idiosyncratic inscriptions to the margins of

the text, composing letters, collages, sketches, photos, diagrams, and poems outlining the disturbing effects of the house on his personal life. And to this unruly assemblage of texts the anonymous editors add the further supplementary material found in the exhibits, appendices, and index, much of which is only tangentially related to the Navidson film. Appendix 2-E, for instance, contains over ten years worth of letters that Johnny's mother Pelafina Lièvre wrote to her son during her stay in a mental institution, while appendix 2-F offers a series of collaged quotations ranging from Homer, Rilke, and Pliny, to Sylvia Plath and *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. In short, each commentator demonstrates a marked inability to circumscribe the disseminating potential of their writings. Starting with Zampanò's manuscript, the number of supplemental inscriptions proliferates exponentially outward, and as more and more disparate texts are drawn into its orbit, the text is gradually transformed into a labyrinth of overwhelming complexity.

What this proliferation marks is the absence of any anchoring or foundational referent within the represented world that would otherwise serve to stabilize, delimit, and control the play of supplementary writing and representation. Put slightly differently, since the Navidson film does not in fact exist, it simply cannot compel a required or necessary reading of itself. That is, there is nothing *intrinsic* in the "film" (what to call this thing?) that the commentators have to respect or remain faithful to, nothing intrinsic that would otherwise serve to constrain the free play of supplementary representation. Consequently, at every stage in the chain of textual transmission the film is read and reread, written and rewritten, constructed in and sustained by the glosses to which it ostensibly gave rise. As such, there is no hierarchy of textual authority in *House of Leaves*. Precisely because it lacks the authority and force of an originary real-world referent, the Navidson film, and thus by extension each of the texts that come to stand in for its absence, remains open to a process of interpretive appropriation beyond any referentially-determined point of closure. Indeed, as we shall see, this interpretive openness ultimately extends to include the novel itself.

So whereas the realist novel points back to a reality, offering itself as a mimetically faithful transcription of some pre-given and stable reality, in *House of Leaves* the referent

– the Navidson film – is established as a concept only, one that, and as N. Katherine Hayles cogently observes, *emerges not behind but through* the superimposition of several layers of textual inscription ("Saving the Subject" 779). As noted above, the first "reading" of *The Navidson Record* is instantiated in Zampanò's manuscript of the same title, which effectively creates the film as an imaginary object of study within the represented world. Yet this manuscript, assembled into a coherent document from literally thousands of divergent fragments, is as much Johnny's production as it is Zampanò's. Moreover, Johnny freely modifies Zampanò's text in order to make it conform more nearly to his own experiences. For example, in an early scene of *The Navidson Record* Karen informs Will "[t]he water heater's on the fritz" (12). In his footnote to this passage, Johnny recounts how he was also obliged to take a cold shower earlier that morning due to a broken water heater. Johnny taunts the reader, asking if he or she thinks, "Is it just coincidence that this cold water predicament of mine also appears in this chapter?" "Not at all" he concedes,

> Zampanò only wrote "heater." The word "water" back there [in the "The Navidson Record"] – I added that.
> Now there's an admission, eh?
> Hey, no fair, you cry.
> Hey, hey, fuck you, I say" (16).

Johnny's textual interventions, of which there is an indeterminate amount throughout the book, radically destabilize the integrity of "The Navidson Record", since the reader simply has no way of ascertaining which sections of the manuscript have been modified and which sections faithfully reproduced. Johnny's "unauthorized" interventions thus implicate him as co-author of both Zampanò's manuscript and the film that text "represents." What is more, the unnamed editors reportedly alter both Johnny and Zampanò's texts. Consequently, the authenticity of every text in the novel is thrown into radical doubt. As Hansen succinctly puts it, "the novel insistently stages the futility of any effort to anchor the events it recounts in a stable recorded form" (602).

Thus liberated from the realist novel's "vocation as a means to stabilize, resurrect, and transmit the past, that is, to cash in a referential promise," Danielewski's novel becomes pre-eminently future-directed and reader-oriented (Hansen, 621). As Danielewski explains in an interview that needs quoting at length here, the whole point of his novel is to pose the challenge of interpretation to the reader:

> Let us say there is no sacred text here. That notion of authenticity or originality is constantly refuted. The novel doesn't allow the reader to ever say, "Oh, I see: this is the authentic, original text, exactly how it looked, what it always had to say." That's the irony of [Johnny's] mother's letters: at first you probably just assume that, okay, this is the real thing, but then the artifice of the way they look starts to undercut everything, so you're not sure. Pretty soon you begin to notice that at every level in the novel some act of interpretation is going on. The question is, why? Well, there are many reasons, but the most important one is that everything we encounter involves an act of interpretation on our part. And this doesn't just apply to what we encounter in books, but to what we respond to in life. Oh, we live comfortably because we create these sacred domains in our head where we believe that we have a specific history, a certain set of experiences. We believe that our memories keep us in direct touch with what has happened. But memory never puts us in touch with anything directly; it's always interpretive, reductive, a complicated compression of information. In *House of Leaves* you're always encountering texts where some kind of intrusion's taking place. The reason? No one – repeat no one – is ever presented with the sacred truth, in books or in life. And so we must be brave and accept how often we make decisions without knowing everything. Of course, this poses a difficult question: can we retain that state of conscious unknowing and still act, or must we, in order to act, necessarily pretend to know? ("Haunted House" 121).

In posing this interpretive challenge to the reader – that is, to generate a reading of the novel without any reliable textual evidence – Danielewski seems to be consciously invoking Jacques Derrida's notion of the "undecidability of the decision." (Danielewski's

familiarity with Derrida's work is evident throughout *House of Leaves*. Indeed, Derrida appears briefly as a character in the novel, in a hilarious scene where Karen questions him about the "meaning" of the enigmatic house). In an interview with Richard Beardsworth, Derrida offered the following succinct summation of his ideas on the problem of undecidability:

> However careful one is in the theoretical preparation of a decision, the instant of the decision, if there is to be a decision, must be heterogeneous to the accumulation of knowledge. Otherwise, there is no responsibility. In this sense not only must the person taking the decision not know everything ... the decision, if there is to be one, must advance towards a future which is not known, which cannot be anticipated ("Nietzsche and the Machine" 37).

According to Derrida, the meaning of any text is inherently unstable and variable. Shot through with *aporias* and indeterminacies, every text carries within itself the seeds of its own deconstruction. The reader is thus unable to arrive at any immutably "correct" interpretation, unable to ever fully master or "[close] off the play" of the text (*Writing and Difference* 279). For Derrida, then, interpretive decisions themselves remain undecidable, always in a state of play, and this ensures that we will always fail to get texts under control, ensures that we will always mis-read texts and get them "wrong."

For Derrida however, creative freedom lies in interpretive failure, in the impossibility of ever closing off the play of the text. In this sense, the constraint of interpretive decision-making foisted on the reader by the indeterminate text is always productive. In order to escape from the territory of the undecidable the reader must make a decision, and this decision necessarily realizes some possibilities latent in the text at the same time as it suppresses others. That is, only by making an ultimately arbitrary decision can freedom be gained. The quest for objective critical criteria inevitably leads to an infinite regress. Conversely, a critical decision that has not passed through what Derrida calls the "ordeal of the undecidable" would not constitute a free decision at all but merely a programmatic or administrative response ("The Force of Law" 24). For Derrida, the moment of the

decision is a moment of madness, a leap of faith in the dark. And it is precisely this "leap" that allows the reader to move beyond the unreadability of the text and into the adventurous country of readability. Without this undecidability, so Derrida argues, no reading as a singular act – indeed, no genuine "reading" at all – would be possible. This is because for Derrida it is this very freedom to read texts creatively, imaginatively, and "disobediently" that constitutes an actual "reading" of them at all, as opposed to an obedient, passive annotation. Any genuine reading, then, is necessary a mis-reading, and as such "meaning" can only be generated at the local level of the reader. In this way, new stories come into being[1].

As Danielewski makes plain in the passage cited above, everything in his complex novel – the non-existence of the film, Johnny's sustained interventions into the text, Zampanò's status as a character in a Fellini movie and his uncanny ability, despite being blind, to review a film – functions in order to pose the challenge of interpretation to the reader. That is, he deliberately fills his text with epistemological paradoxes and *aporias*, thereby forcing the would-be interpreter to make a number of radically contingent and *singular* interpretive decisions that effectively imbricate the reader in the process of meaning-making in the text. With Johnny's reading as a model, the reader is encouraged to take the text as a point of departure, as a catalyst for his or her own "improvised" textual performances. Thus, although Danielewski does not wish to affix an authoritative meaning to his text, as Martin Brick observes, "he retains for himself the difficult task of making readers aware of their own participation in the text" ("Blueprint(s)", no pagination). Paradoxically enough, in *House of Leaves* it is only through the *constraint* of the undecidable decision that readerly *freedom* is activated.

One metaphor the book offers for this process is that of riddle solving. For Danielewski, it would seem, the vast majority of riddles are unanswerable:

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[1] For Derrida on the 'undecidability of the decision' see his "Remarks on Deconstruction and Pragmatism" and "Deconstructions: The Im-possible." For politically oriented accounts of Derridean undecidability see Ernesto Laclau's "Deconstruction, Pragmatism, Hegemony", and Keith Jenkins's *Refiguring History: New Thoughts on an old Discipline* (especially 23-25).

> Riddles: they either delight or torment. Their delight lies in solutions. Answers provide bright moments of comprehension perfectly suited for children who still inhabit a world where solutions are readily available ... The adult world, however, produces riddles of a different variety. They do not have answers and are often called enigmas or paradoxes. Still the old hint of the riddle's form corrupts these questions by re-echoing the most fundamental lesson: there must be an answer. From there comes torment (33).

The "torment" of the unanswerable riddle described here forms a perfect allegory for the "ordeal of the undecidable" experienced by readers during *aporetic* or decision-making moments. Just as release from such a moment comes only through a radically contingent and singular act of reading, so to, Danielewski suggests, the unanswerable riddle elicits from the reader a singular act of interpretation: ""Riddling" is an offshoot of "reading" calling to mind the participatory nature of that act – to interpret – which is all the adult world has left when faced with the unsolvable" (33). Nevertheless, the crucial figure offered for the indeterminate text is that of the inextricable labyrinth, and the process of navigating the labyrinth thematized within the represented world supplies the correlate for the singular and unrepeatable act of reading the novel itself.

House of Leaves as a Textual Labyrinth

The unusual typographical experiments of *House of Leaves*, more akin to concrete poetry than what one expects to find in the novel, calls to mind the famous Borges quote from "The Garden of Forking Paths": "No one realized that the book and the labyrinth were one and the same" (*Ficciones* 54). As the novel's title makes plain, however, Danielewski would explicitly have us consider his book as architecture, a textual labyrinth that mirrors the warping dimensions of Navidson's house. In the chapter known as "The Labyrinth," for instance, when the explorers are lost and disoriented amid the house's endless corridors and rooms, the layout of the text reflects this sense of disorientation. The number of footnotes begins to proliferate wildly and invade the main body of the text, creating word-columns that run sideways and upside-down, text-boxes

or "rooms" within the centre of the page, and encyclopedic lists that worm their way through the book like a spiral staircase. At another point, when Navidson is crawling down a shrinking tunnel, the amount of text on the pages gets progressively smaller; when he descends a stairwell, the text curls itself into a spiral, forcing the reader to slowly rotate the book.

Significantly, the word "house" is printed throughout in blue ink, suggesting that this word functions similarly to an internet hyperlink. The implication is that by "clicking" on this word the reader will be transported to another part of the book, that the book alters its shape to accommodate the reader. The footnotes also continually direct the reader elsewhere within the text, forcing the reader to flip back and forth between the different chapters as well as between the "main" text and the appendices. As such, there are a large number of possible pathways through the book, as opposed to the singular left-to-right first-page-to-last linearity common to most works of fiction. Often the reader is presented with a choice between two divergent narrative pathways, and every decision the reader makes at these junctions necessarily alters their reading experience and perception of the novel as a whole. Perhaps the most significant of these is footnote 78 on page 72, which suggests the reader should turn to appendix 2-E and read the letters collected there by Johnny's mother, Pelafina. If the letters are read before resuming the narrative, the knowledge they impart significantly alters the reading experience, particularly one's perception of Johnny Truant. Not only does the reader begin to understand Johnny's peculiar psychology a little better, the reader is suddenly made aware of the fact that Johnny is a much more competent writer than he lets on. In his interview with Danielewski, Larry McCaffery recounts how the letters affected his own personal reading experience:

> [O]nce I finished her letters and returned to page 72, several things had occurred. First, it was now clearer to me that the author of this book had a much wider range of styles and voices than I had suspected up to that point. And second, throughout the rest of the novel, I was very aware that I now had a completely different perspective on Johnny Truant than if I had not turned from page 72 to

> appendix E. I was quite literally reading a different book from the one most other readers would be reading ("Haunted House" 111-12).

Thus, although *House of Leaves* may be read from first page to last, the reader is explicitly encouraged to navigate their own singular pathway through this immense labyrinth of a book, each reading offering a significantly different perspective of the events it recounts.

Undecidability is part of Derrida's sustained attempt to trouble dualisms, or more precisely, to reveal how they are always already unstable and troubled. In Derrida's deconstructive readings, an undecidable is something that cannot conform to either polarity of a binary opposition. Prominent examples of these include ghost, *pharmakon*, and hymen, which, so Derrida argues, play between presence and absence, cure and poison, and inside and outside respectively. To this list of undecidables, we might add the labyrinth. While discussing Navidson's spatially warped house, Zampanò quotes the following passage from Penelope Reed Doob's *The Idea of the Labyrinth from Classical Antiquity through the Middle Ages*:

> [M]aze-treaders, whose vision ahead and behind is severely constricted and fragmented, suffer confusion, whereas maze-viewers who see the pattern whole, from above or in a diagram, are dazzled by its complex artistry. What you see depends on where you stand, and thus, at one and the same time, labyrinths are single (there is one physical structure) and double: they simultaneously incorporate order and disorder, clarity and confusion, unity and multiplicity, artistry and chaos. ... Our perception of labyrinths is thus intrinsically unstable: change your perspective and the labyrinth seems to change (114).

Although not cited in *House of Leaves*, elsewhere in her book Doob explicitly links the undecidability of labyrinthine structure with Derrida's notion of the textual *aporia*: "the concept of *aporia* (the "unpassable path," self-contradiction, paradox) sheds light on the labyrinth's embodiment of paradox, its simultaneous affirmation of antinomies:

order/chaos, imprisonment/liberation, linearity/circularity, clarity/complexity, stability/instability" (8-9). In this sense, Navidson's house-labyrinth furnishes a particularly apt figure for the novel itself, a textual labyrinth within which the reader is forced at every turn to negotiate or "decide" unsolvable *aporias* and indeterminacies.

Since, as Doob points out, "error is inherent in the maze's structure," so the interpretive decisions made within are necessarily fallible (250). Nevertheless, if "perfect knowledge (and therefore perfect action) is impossible" from *within*, once the labyrinth is penetrated and seen from above its perceived chaos and disorder are converted into dazzling artistry and redemptive form (Doob 248-49). But as Zampanò points out in one of the novel's most self-reflexive passages, even the "dichotomy between those who participate inside and those who view from the outside breaks down when considering [Navidson's] house, simply because no one ever sees the labyrinth in its entirety" (114). "Therefore," he goes on to conclude, "comprehension of its intricacies must always be derived from within" (114). This predicament is also true of the reader's engagement with *House of Leaves*. In one of his many direct addresses to the reader, Johnny warns us that the book we hold in our hands is so vast and labyrinthine that we may not be able to free ourselves from it. The house will consume you, Johnny cautions, just as his efforts to make coherent sense of Zampanò's manuscript rendered him an obsessive, nervous wreck. And in the first of many instances in the novel, Johnny suggests that a singular act of reading is the only available means of escape from the agony of the undecidable house: "Old shelters – television, magazines, movies – won't protect you anymore. You might try scribbling in a journal, on a napkin, maybe even in the margins of this book" (xxiii).

Danielewski takes pains to underscore the absolute inaccessibility of full knowledge, the utter impossibility of gaining a stable vantage point from above the textual labyrinth where its meaning and pattern may be discerned. In other words, he warns readers against searching for some essential "meaning" behind his book. Zampanò notes that one sure way to escape any maze is "to simply keep one hand on a wall and walk in one direction. Eventually the exit will be found" (115). In the case of Navidson's house, however, this

method would "probably require an infinite amount of time and resources" (115). What Danielewski seems to be suggesting here is that, like the explorers in the labyrinth, the reader simply cannot exhaust every possible meaning of the text, and thus can only ever trace an utterly singular pathway through the immense labyrinth of the novel: "It cannot be forgotten that the problem posed by exhaustion – a result of labor – is an inextricable part of any encounter with a sophisticated maze. In order to escape then, we have to remember we cannot ponder all paths but must decode only those necessary to get out. We must be quick and anything but exhaustive" (115).

This passage by Zampanò (or is that Danielewski?) seems to be deliberately echoing John Barth's discussion of Borges in his celebrated essay "The Literature of Exhaustion":

> Now, not just any old body is equipped for this labor; Theseus in the Cretan labyrinth becomes in the end the aptest image of Borges after all. Distressing as the fact is to us liberal democrats, the commonalty, alas, will always lose their way and their soul; it is the chosen remnant, the virtuoso, the Thesean hero, who, confronted with Baroque reality, Baroque history, the Baroque state of his art, need not rehearse its possibilities to exhaustion, any more than Borges needs actually write the Encyclopedia of Tlön or the books in the Library of Babel. He need only be aware of their existence or possibility, acknowledge them, and with the aid of very special gifts – as extraordinary as saint- or herohood...go straight through the maze to the accomplishment of his work (75-76).

The evocation of Borges here is particularly apt since he, perhaps more than any other postmodern writer, equated the singular act of reading with that of writing. What I am arguing here constitutes the only possible response and means of escape from textual labyrinths. Borges's story "Pierre Menard, author of *Don Quixote*" is perhaps his most famous allegory of the singular, or more accurately, *unrepeatable* act of reading. In this story, Menard reproduces several fragments of Cervantes's novel word for word. Because of the changed cultural context, however, these fragments are imbued with meanings not present in the original, as if it is the singular encounter between the modern reader and

book that gives the text its meaning. Borges's story underscores the uniqueness and unrepeatability of every act of reading, even if that reading merely repeats a canonical text verbatim[2].

For Danielewski, the process of interpretation, or more accurately, the radically contingent, singular act of reading, is all that the reader has left when faced with the unsolvable, labyrinthine text:

> Unfortunately, the anfractuosity of some labyrinths may actually prohibit a permanent solution. More confounding still, its complexity may exceed the imagination of even the designer. Therefore anyone lost within must recognize that no one, not even a god or an Other, comprehends the entire maze and so therefore can never offer a definitive answer. Navidson's house seems a perfect example. Due to the wall-shifts and extraordinary size, any way out remains singular and applicable only to those on that path at that particular time. All solutions then are necessarily personal (115).

Furthermore, Navidson's and the explorers' navigation of the house allegorizes the reader's personal navigation and concretization of the textual labyrinth. Because of the constant wall-shifts, each individual expedition into the house is quite literally a personal and singular experience. Zampanò observes that the same path can never be taken twice: "While some portions of the house, like the Great Hall for instance, seem to offer a communal experience, many inter-communicating passageways encountered by individual members, even with only a glance, will never be re-encountered by anyone else again" (118). On his second journey, Navidson trails a fishing line behind himself in order to retrace his steps, yet this line is either snapped or mysteriously absorbed by the

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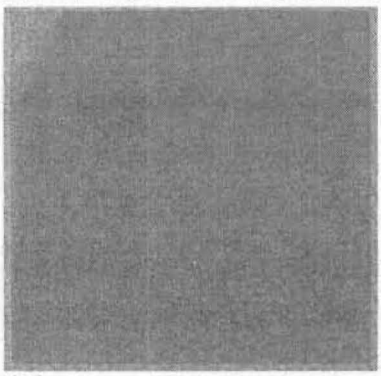
[2] In yet another iteration of Cervantes's text, Zampanò cites Menard's fragments in his chapter on echoes, claiming to have meet Menard in a Paris café after the second world war (42). And like the narrator of Borges's story, Zampanò' compares Menard's fragment on the nature of history to Cervantes's "original," concluding that "Menard's nuances are so fine they are nearly undetectable, though talk with the framer and you will immediately see how haunted they are by sorrow, accusation, and sarcasm," to which Johnny adds the following footnote: "Exactly! How the fuck do you write about 'exquisite variation' when both passages are exactly the same?" (42).

house. The wall-shifts preclude any possibility of definitively mapping that place. The singular journeys of individuals into the house thus mirror within the text the singular and, for Danielewski as for Borges, unrepeatable act of navigating or reading any text.

In the fundamental absence of light, the house serves as a kind of resonator onto which the explorers of the house, viewers of the film, and readers of Zampanò's manuscript are encouraged to *project* their own fears and anxieties. For Navidson, the house invokes a number of personal demons. Chief among these is the guilt he feels for photographing a dying Sudanese child, a photo that won him the Pulitzer Prize and considerable fame. Zampanò quotes one Dr Iben Van Pollit, who claims that the house's mutations "were merely manifestations of [Navidson's] own troubled psyche" (21). Elsewhere, Zampanò cites a "Dr Haugeland" who "asserts that the extraordinary absence of sensory information forces the individual to manufacture his or her own data", while Ruby Dahl call the house "a solipsistic heightener" in which "the house, the halls, and the rooms all become the self – collapsing, expanding, tilting, closing, but always in perfect relation to the mental state of the individual" (165). Here, the propensity of the house to reflect the mental state of the individual correlates with the idea that the "meaning" of the novel is itself constructed through the reader's singular navigation of the text.

As Martin Brick observes, "[t]he darkness of the house is an unstable signifier ... resonator of whatever fear or *meaning* the reader chooses to attach to it" ("Blueprint(s)" no pagination). In this perspective, perhaps the most significant instance of interior duplication occurs on page 143, where the blue box occupies the upper potion of the page (Figure 1).

Ironically, the very technology that instructs us to mistrust the image also creates the means by which to accredit it.



As author Murphy Gruner once remarked:

"Just as is true with Chandler's Marlowe, the viewer is won over simply because the shirts are rumpled, the soles are worn, and there's that ever present hat. These days nothing deserves our faith less than the slick and expensive. Which is how video and film technology comes to us: rumpled or slick.

"Rumpled Technology —capital M for Marlowe—hails from Good Guys, Radio Shack or Fry's Electronics. It is cheap, available and very dangerous. One needs only to consider *The George Holliday Rodney King Video* to recognize the power of such low-end technology. Furthermore, as the recording time for tapes and digital disks increases, as battery life is extended, and as camera size is reduced, the larger the window will grow for capturing events as they occur.

"Slick Technology — capital S for Slick— is the opposite: expensive, cumbersome, and time consuming. But it too is also very powerful. Digital manipulation allows for the creation of almost anything the imagination can come up with, all in the safe confines of an editing suite, equipped with 24 hour catering and an on site masseuse."[186]

[186]Murphy Gruner's *Document Detectives* (New York: Pantheon, 1995), p. 37.[187]

[187] ~~One can imagine a group of Documentary Detectives whose sole purpose is to uphold Truth & Truth~~[≫] ~~by guaranteeing the the authenticity of all works. Their seal of approval would create a sense of public faith which could only be main tained if said Documentary Detec tives were as fierce as pit bulls and as scrupulous as saints. Of course, this is more the kind of thing a novelist or playwright would deal with, and as I am pointedly not a novelist or a playwright I will leave that tale to someone else—~~

[≫] Or TNT. Truth And Truth therefore becoming another name for the nitrating of toluene or $C_7H_5N_3O_6$—not to be confused with $C_{16}H_{16}N_2O_2$—in other words one word: trinitrotoluene. TNT[188] telegraphing a weird coalition of sense. On one hand transcendent and lasting and on the other violent and extremely flammable.

Interior duplication is a moment wherein the mechanisms of the text and the associated operations of reading are mirrored within the text in miniature. As a miniature replica of the text, interior duplication draws the reader's attention to some important element of the texts formal mechanisms. The blue box is one such instance. As Hayles has pointed out, blue is the color of the backing screens used in film production. With the magic of cinematography and special effects, the blue screen can accommodate virtually any image the filmmaker dreams up. Since the novel is so heavily involved with film, Hayles rightly suggests that this blue box, and thus by extension the novel itself, can be considered as a screen or site of projection foregrounding the reader's participation in the construction of the text's meaning ("Saving the Subject" 793). This screen functions as a site for the project of textual worlds. Just as the filmmaker projects flickering new cinematic worlds upon the blue screen of film production, so too the reader of *House of Leaves* is invited to project their own textual worlds onto the "screen" of the page. The primarily way in which Danielewski draws our attention to this is through the figure of Johnny Truant and his interaction with Zampanò's text.

Readerly Projection

> Vladimir: *What do [the leaves] say?*
> Estragon: *They talk about their lives.*
> Vladimir: *To have lived is not enough for them.*
> Estragon: *They have to talk about it.*
>
> – Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*[3]

The problem of reading that Johnny encounters in his efforts to make sense of Zampanò's manuscript doubles our own when confronted by Danielewski's problematic text. For as Danielewski explains in an interview, by incorporating his personal history into the text, Johnny serves as a model for how he wants his readers to approach the book:

[3] This epigraph is stolen from, or mediated via way of, Joseph Dewey's article "Rick Moody."

> The way that Johnny projects himself into, or onto, Zampanò's book shows how the text of *The Navidson Record* functions as it is being read and assembled by the readers themselves. Johnny even goes so far as to modify it. Not only does the book permit that, it is really saying to the reader, "Now *you* modify it." That invitational aspect of the book at least has been very successful. I've received a lot of feedback from readers who have responded by telling me about their anxieties and why the book evoked these for them ... [S]o the next question is, "*Why* does that make you uncomfortable? What specifically makes that sense of falling uncomfortable to you?" Right there you're on the threshold of a whole series of stories that the book has allowed you to access but that are, at the same time, particular to you ("Haunted House" 120).

Here, again, Danielewski underscores the future-directed and reader-oriented dimension of his book. In the process of editing Zampanò's manuscript, Johnny makes a number of alterations to the text. Furthermore, he appends his own supplemental texts to its margins that revolve around the problem of meaning: how it is to be determined and understood, how we set about making sense of lives or texts despite the apparent senselessness of it all. Prompted by the events of the film, Johnny reviews his past in a bid to uncover a sense of coherence in his life. In the same interview, Danielewski goes to state: "I should say intellectual engagement has never been my primary goal. Important, but not primary. Rather I've always wanted to create scenes and scenarios that verge on the edge of specificity without crossing into identification, leaving enough room, so to speak, for the reader to participate and supply her own fears, his own anxieties, their own history and future" ("Haunted House" 119-120). The reader, then, is quite explicitly invited to project him or herself onto the text in the same way Johnny projects himself onto Zampanò's, to add their own dark etchings to its margins and many white spaces, to approach it (to crib a phrase from Joseph Dewey) as a kind of Beckettian "notebook-qua-talisman" ("Rick Moody" 8).

Furthermore, not only does Johnny's reading serve as a model for the reader, but his pointless quest to locate the Navidson house functions as an allegory warning readers on the futility of any attempt to uncover within the novel a foundational reality behind or beyond the play of supplementary writing and representation. For it is precisely the absence of any authoritative real-world referent that would otherwise serve to stabilize and control the play of supplementary inscription that allows Johnny – and thus by extension the reader – the interpretive freedom to project their own desires and fantasies onto the text. Put slightly differently, in the absence of a controlling referent, every text within the novel remains open to a process of interpretive appropriation beyond any logical point of curtailment. Nevertheless, in full knowledge of the fact that the Navidson film is a fiction, Johnny sets out in search of the house, as if hoping that evidence verifying its existence will somehow dispel "the terrible sense of relatedness" he feels toward Zampanò's manuscript and ground the proliferation of texts in a "recognizable" reality (326). The impossible house, however, never in fact existed; rather it was only ever part of an imaginary film that Johnny himself had a hand in creating. Similarly, for readers of *House of Leaves* there simply is no appealing to a traditional concept of novelistic mimesis that would point back to some grounding referent or reality beyond the mere play of textual inscription. Inevitably, then, Johnny returns from his quest disappointed, have failed to locate Navidson's house. But it is precisely this failure that allows Johnny to appropriate Zampanò's manuscript for his own purposes: "Virginia [where the house is ostensibly located] may have meant a great deal to Zampanò's imagination. It doesn't to mine. I'm following something else. Maybe parallel. Possibly harmonic. Certainly personal" (502).

Thus, freed from the strictures of mimetic faithfulness and interpretive truth, Johnny's "commentary" becomes less an objective, scholarly analysis of Zampanò's manuscript and more a manifestly autobiographical text set on exploring his own personal reactions to the house. Indeed, the unique form of the "The Navidson Record" – its seemingly incomplete state, its blanks and elisions, its multiple reading paths – allows for any number of supplemental readings, thus demonstrating how the gaps in real history become opportune occasions for appropriation and invention. In editing the manuscript,

Johnny must fill in these gaps and indeterminacies, decide whether to restore or "resurrect" deletions, and arbitrate between variant readings of the same passages (111). In the process, he begins to project his own textual worlds onto the page:

> (Now that I think about it, I guess I've always gravitated towards written legacies (private lands surrounded by great bewildering oceans (a description I don't entirely understand even as I write it down now (though the sense of adventure about words (that little "l" making so little difference), appeals to me – ah but to hell with the closing parent)he)see)s) (sic) (379).

Through Johnny's acts of interpretation and invention, Danielewski's novel thematizes Gerard Genette's observation that "the time of literary works is not the definite time of writing, but the indefinite time of reading and of memory. The meaning of books is before them, not behind them" (cited in David Packman's *The Structure of Literary Desire* 13). For Danielewski, a text's meaning is generated in the encounter between reader and book, where meaning is made and remade in a process beyond any logical point of curtailment. The passage above neatly brings this point home: Johnny is unable to close even this single sentence.

By underscoring the absence of the real behind the various textual inscriptions, Danielewski's novel moves beyond the anxieties commonly associated with the loss of the real and into a casual acceptance of simulation. In a universe where there is no grounding reality, norm, or standard to deviate from, readers both within and without the novel's frame are free to project their own idiosyncratic textual worlds onto the blue-screen of the house. Of course, the anxiety deftly sidestepped here is a major issue in much postmodern literature. Maurice Couturier traces this characteristic theme back to Thomas Pynchon's seminal novel *The Crying of Lot 49*. Drawing on the ideas of Jean Baudrillard, Couturier argues that this work constitutes the first novelistic allegory on the theme of simulation and the liquidation of the referential value of language:

> Oedipa Maas thinks that everything is real in her California until she is lured into the shadow world of the Tristero with its shadow communication system. She becomes gradually aware of what Jean Baudrillard calls the "agony of the powerful referents, the agony of the real and the rational," an agony that is precipitated by the proliferation of the media and the techniques of simulation. She would like to stop this proliferation, but, in order to do so, she must first rediscover the authentic text hidden beneath the surface of everyday reality. Her crusade lamentably fails, because she keeps unearthing more and more texts that duplicate reality and make the "real" more elusive. Her quest is circular: the "real" she is looking for is, of course, her elusive self ("Nabokov in postmodernist land" 256).

Conversely, *House of Leaves* freely admits its simulacral "foundation" in order to foreground the active role the reader plays in concretizing and creating the novelistic world. Like Oedipa, Johnny attempts to uncover indexical evidence of the Navidson film's existence, which if found would halt the escalation of texts. What he discovers, however, is an infinite regress of texts such that the referent, if it in fact existed at all, has long since been lost beyond recall. But rather than resulting in despair, the fundamental absence of the real behind the simulations allows Johnny the freedom to rewrite the text and project his own textual worlds onto Zampanò manuscript, and this is precisely what Danielewski expects his readers to do.

In other words, since everything in this novel of mediations lacks any sure foundation or grounding referent that would otherwise give the various simulations the force and status of the indexical, the various texts, and ultimately, the novel itself, can only acquire a sense of conviction through producing *reality affects* in the reader, that is, through the reader's singular and personalized reading of the text (Hansen 621). As Hansen succinctly puts it,

> Far more important ... than the epistemological hurdles [the novel offers up] is the ontological indifference underlying them and the definitive departure that it

> signals away from the tired postmodern agonies bound up with the figure of simulation. It is as if mediation has become so ubiquitous and inexorable in the world of the novel (which is, after all, our world too) as simply to *be* reality, to be the bedrock upon which out investment and belief in the real can be built (601).

Indeed, on the very first page of his commentary, Zampanò suggests that his readers forgo issues of referentiality and focus instead simply on what is *in* the text and what this may mean for the individual reader: "Though many continue to devote substantial time and energy to the antimonies of fact or fiction, representation or artifice, documentary or prank, as of late the more interesting material dwells exclusively on the interpretation of events within the film. This direction seems more promising, even if the house itself, like Melville's behemoth, remains resistant to summation" (3). Therefore, through the critical imperative to give up on the referent and simply accept the nature of the text as simulacrum allegorized in Johnny Truant's pointless quest for the impossible house, Danielewski's novel comes to form a perfect illustration of Brian McHale's definition of the postmodernist text: "The dead-ending of epistemology in solipsism can be transcended, but only by shifting from a modernist poetics of epistemology to a postmodernist poetics of ontology, from Oedipa's anguished cry, "Shall I project a world?," to the unconstrained projection of worlds in the plural" (*Postmodernist Fiction* 25).

In *House of Leaves* there simply is no appealing to a traditional novelistic concept of mimesis that would point back to some foundational reality behind the play of textual inscription. The Navidson documentary, the ostensible referent behind Zampanò's and Johnny's inscriptions, is a mere idea only, a catalyst for a proliferating series a texts that create the film as a putative object through a perpetual redoubling of text upon text. Here, the referent (if we may call it that) does not so much stand at the beginning of a train of secondary representations as it does at the end, emerging gradually through the process of representation rather than anchoring it.

This situation is very similar to what, in *Dissemination*, Derrida finds in Mallarmé's prose-poem "Mimique." According to Derrida, in this text Mallarmé has hit upon an excellent alternative to Platonic mimesis. Based on a mime in which the performer was required to improvise a kind of gestural writing imitating nothing, Mallarmé composes or improvises a short text. Mallarmé, however, never saw the original performance, he only read about it in a booklet after the event. Thus rather than mimetically describing the mime's performance, Mallarmé's text *mimics*, so Derrida argues, the *idea* of the mime's performance – that is, to produce a gestural writing with no prior modal or authentic source to fall back on. In this way, Mallarmé is faithful to the mime's performance, but not in any mimetic sense in which he could be said to have accurately reproduced the original.

> We are faced then with mimicry imitating nothing. ... There is no simple reference. It is in this that the mime's operation does not allude, but alludes to nothing. ... Mallarmé [in "Mimique"] thus preserves the differential structure of mimicry or *mimesis*, but without its Platonic or metaphysical interpretation, which implies that somewhere the being of something that *is*, is being imitated. Mallarmé even maintains (and maintains himself in) the structure of the *phantasma* as it is defined by Plato: the simulation as the copy of a copy. With the exception that there is no longer any model, and hence no copy (cited in Gregory L. Ulmer "The Object of Post-Criticism" 92).

A similar dynamic is overtly operative in Danielewski's novel. Since *The Navidson Record* does not exist as a verifiable object within the represented world, Zampanò's commentary on the film is a mere simulation of a commentary that creates, describes, and narrates the film at the same time as it analyzes it. Also significant in this regard is Zampanò decision to create an imaginary *film*. As Gregory Ulmer points out, "[o]nce one realizes that the mime emblematizes (for Derrida) mechanical reproduction, it becomes apparent that representation without reference is a description of the way film or tape functions as a "language," ... mechanical reproduction removes or lifts sights and sounds from their contexts [and] *de*-motivates them, hence the loss of reference, the

undecidability of allusion" (92). One might venture to suggest, then, that even if the documentary film existed, its mechanical means of re-production would still result in the loss of the referent[4].

In this notes to the manuscript, Johnny does not attempt to recuperate the film through the values and assumptions of mimesis so much as he endeavours to mimic the way Zampanò created, from scratch as it were, a fictive narrative and presented it as fact. In his first extended footnote, Johnny retells a hilarious story he told the night before to a group of girls he was trying to impress while out at a bar. He recounts for the reader how he improvised the story:

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[4] In contrast to Derrida and Ulmer, Hansen stresses the referential power of mechanical reproduction. For Hansen, orthographic recording (literally, "straight writing") designates the capacity of various technologies – such as photography, film, and magnetic tape – to register an *exact inscription* of "the real" ("The Digital Topography of Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves*" 603). The "orthographic force" of such technologies stems precisely from their technical (or chemical) means of inscription, which makes possible the literal copy or transcription of events. Technical recording, in other words, "insulates the past, the "that has been," even as it allows for its re-presentification" (605). Hansen, citing Roland Barthes, argues that the orthographic faculty finds its fullest realization in the evidentiary punch of photography and film. In contrast to writing and painting, Barthes argues, photographic inscription furnishes indexical evidence of a referent's existence: "I call "photographic referent" not the *optionally* real thing to which an image or sign refers but the *necessarily* real thing which has been placed before the lens, without which there would be no photograph. ... [I]n Photography I can never deny that *the thing has been there*" (603). Orthographic recording technologies, and in particular photography and film, register exact inscriptions of events in a way that brings "together reality and the past" – something realist literature aspires to but simply cannot achieve in this strict, literal sense (603). Nevertheless, the house on Ash Tree lane emerges as ontologically alien to the principle of orthographic recording. Indeed, its entrance into the world of the film is immediately heralded by a failure of technical orthography. Initially, Navidson's film is a straightforward documentary of his family's new life in the country: a modest project that poses no problems for orthographic recording. According to Zampanò's summation, the film opens with "pristine glimpses of the Virginia countryside, the rural neighbourhood, purple hills born on the fringe of night" (9), before moving on to domestic scenes of the family settling into their new home. The referential value of the house, however, is immediately uncut when the family return from a brief holiday to find that a new door has mysteriously appeared in the living room. Zampanò describes how Navidson plays back the Hi 8 tapes to find out who or what caused the alteration, and discovers that the cameras have failed to register the change: "[T]he motion sensors were never triggered. Only their exit and re-entrance exists on tape. Virtually a week seamlessly elided, showing us the family as they depart from a house without that strange interior space present only to return a fraction of a second later to find it already in place" (28).

> "Very well," I said, starting then to recall for everyone how at the lonely age of nineteen I had climbed off a barge in Galveston. "Actually I escaped," I improvised. "See, I still owed my crazy Russian Captain a thousand dollars for a wager I'd lost in Singapore. He wanted to murder me so I practically had to run the whole way to Houston" (13).

What follows is a tall story involving an underground kickboxing club, a load of smuggled drugs, and five crates full of exotic birds, all of which ends with Johnny in Florida "nearly dying in a cold water place called Devil's Ear" (15). On a first reading, this seemingly irrelevant story seems to have little connection to the content of Zampanò's opening chapter, which discusses the "antinomies of fact or fiction" surrounding the Navidson film. However, it soon becomes that, rather than simply adding his own opinion on the veracity of the film, Johnny is creating in the margins a parallel text that *mimics* the thematics of Zampanò text. In improvising his ludicrous story and pitching it as fact, Johnny mimics in a different register Zampanò story of the impossible house in the form of a "critical commentary." Thus Johnny is in this sense faithful to Zampanò's text, although not a mimetic faithful that purports to reproduce its original. In turn, Danielewski's reader is invited to repeat this "aboriginal swerve from origins, since the text ... can give no assurance of anything more solidly grounded than a play of multiplied textual inscriptions" (Christopher Norris, *Derrida* 50-51).

Nevertheless, despite the fundamental equality of all texts in the face of the absence of the real, Johnny and Zampanò are locked in a struggle for textual control, each trying to assert mastery over the other. This relationship, however, is inherently unstable; both writers negotiate their respective positions in an endless game of musical chairs. On the one hand, there is a sense in which Johnny creates Zampanò by editing or remediating the old man's text into a coherent document, and in this sense, Johnny has textual control. On the other hand, there are times when Johnny feels that Zampanò is speaking through him or directing him, investing him with memories and associations that are not his own. Moreover, Zampanò often addresses Johnny directly, and this destabilizes the idea that Johnny has ontological priority as the editor of the dead man's manuscript:

> More and more often, I've been overcome by the strangest feeling that I've gotten it all turned around, by which I mean to say—to state the not-so-obvious—without it *I* would perish. A moment comes when suddenly everything seems impossibly far and confused, my sense of self derealized & depersonalized, the disorientation so severe I actually believe—and let me tell you it is an intensely strange instance of belief—that this terrible sense of relatedness to Zampanò's work implies something that just can't be, namely that this thing has created me; not me unto it, but now it unto me, where I am nothing more than the matter of some other voice, intruding through the folds of what even now lies there agape, possessing me with histories I should never recognize as my own; inventing me, defining me, directing me until finally every association I can claim as my own . . . is relegated to nothing; forcing me to face the most terrible suspicion of all, that all of this has just been made up and what's worse, not made up by me or even for that matter Zampanò.
> Though by whom I have no idea (326).

In this reading, then, Zampanò is in control. Moreover, Johnny's sense that he is being made up by someone else indicates that Danielewski, the author of this book, is himself drawn in to the merry-go-round of substitution. Thus, as Hayles writes, "[t]hese connections make clear that the book refuses to lie quiescent in its 'binding tomb.' Just as the House walls endlessly rearrange themselves, so the ontological distinctions that separate Navidson from Zampanò, Zampanò from Johnny, Johnny from Danielewski, and Danielewski from the reader keep shifting and changing" ("Saving the Subject" 801). By extension, then, the reader herself is drawn into novel's transferential drama.

Danielewski gives the volatile relationship between Johnny and Zampanò concrete expression in the image of the brass bull, an instrument of torture inside which victims are caged:

> Zampanò is trapped but where may surprise you. He's trapped inside me, and what's more he's fading, I can hear him, just drifting off, consumed within, digested I suppose ... his voice has gotten even fainter, still echoing in the chambers of my heart, sounding those eternal tones of grief, though no longer playing the pipes in my head. I can see myself clearly. I am in a black room. My belly is brass and I am hollow. I am engulfed in flame and suddenly very afraid (338).

Paradoxically, both Johnny and Zampanò are figured simultaneously as the bull *encapsulating the other*, and *the victim encapsulated by the other*. The desired control slides elusively back and forth between the two, since neither one is able to finally position themselves as the source of the other's words.

House of Leaves as a Textual Assemblage

> A book is more than a verbal structure or series of verbal structures; it is the dialogue it establishes with its reader . . . A book is not an isolated being: it is a relationship, an axis of innumerable relationships.
>
> – Borges

I now want to expand my discussion of *House of Leaves* to look at Danielewski's reconfiguration of the standard concept of the 'Book'. Hayles argues that in Johnny's (re)construction of Zampanò's text his "determination to make the book stay decently under its covers, figured as a kind of death that will render the text safely inert, is subverted by the links to Johnny in Zampanò's narrative, an inversion of inside-outside" thus warning readers that *House of Leaves* itself cannot "be bound so that its leaves will not spill out of their container" ("Saving the Subject" 799). The problem with any thematic or phenomenological interpretation, however, lies precisely in its effort to circumscribe and contain these disturbing effects of writing.

The reading I offer above, for instance, constitutes *House of Leaves* as a polyphonic text focused on the continuous problematization of anything like full meaning through a complex mirroring and overlaying of textual inscriptions. Danielewski's novel, I suggest, demonstrates how the interpretative impulse to contain and demarcate a set of words that constitutes a singular and unified "work" is continually thwarted by the disseminating potential of writing. In reconstituting these unruly effects of writing as the novel's core themes, however, the totalizing process of interpretation ultimately points to some interpretative truth over and above the play of textual inscriptions. So if we are not simply going to "repeat that gesture of containment by which commentary seeks to close off the play of textual inscriptions and restore writing to an order of self-present truth" (Christopher Norris, *Derrida* 58), we shall need a reading strategy that factors in – or better, *helps produce* – the various ways *House of Leaves* enacts a concept of the book as a Deleuze and Guattarian "textual assemblage", that is to say, a "multiplicity of nonidentity".

The following "rhizomatic" reading is indebted to Robert Briggs's pragmatic (and playful) critical application of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's theorization of the book as "textual assemblage". In his article, Briggs produces Paul Auster's *The New York Trilogy* (1988) as a textual assemblage, thereby providing a useful working model with which to analyze literary texts that refuse to remain "safely inert" within the binding covers of a book. I have therefore adopted a similar theoretical position from which to analyse the problem of the book that *House of Leaves* poses. It is hoped this rhizomatic reading will provide a structurally necessary supplement to the (provisional, necessarily fictional) thematic interpretation above.

The idea of fiction[5] as nonidentity, Briggs argues, is essential to Deleuze and Guattari's re-conceptualization of the 'book' in the famous 'Rhizome' chapter of *A Thousand Plateaus*: "[f]or Deleuze and Guattari ... a book is not something that can be definitively identified, which is to say, reduced to a form of identity... [t]he very substance of the

book is what disrupts the processes of identification, what refuses a unity" ("Wrong Numbers" 214). Briggs's quotation from Deleuze and Guattari is worth reproducing here:

> A book has neither object nor subject; it is made of variously formed matters, and very different dates and speeds. To attribute the book to a subject is to overlook this working of matters, and the exteriority of their relations. [...] In a book, as in all things, there are lines of articulation or segmentarity, strata and territories; but also lines of flight, movements of deterritorialization and destratification. [...] All this, lines and measurable speeds, constitute an *assemblage.* A book is an assemblage of this kind, and as such is unattributable. It is a multiplicity – but we don't know yet what the multiple entails when it is no longer attributed, that is, after it has been elevated to the status of a substantive. [...A book is continually] attributing to itself subjects that it leaves with nothing more than a name as the trace of an intensity. [...] Here, as elsewhere, the units of measure are what is essential: *quantify writing.* There is no difference between what a book talks about and how it is made. Therefore a book has no object. As an assemblage, a book has only itself, in connection with other assemblages [...] We will never ask what a book means, as signified or signifier; we will not look for anything to understand in it. We will ask what it functions with, in connection with what other things it does or does not transmit intensities, in which other multiplicities its own are inserted and metamorphosed. (214, quotation slightly modified)

What is important for our purposes here is that the 'book' is no longer seen as an organic unity or a clearly delineated totality possessing an intrinsic identity; on the contrary, fiction *is the very condition of nonidentity.* Moreover, as an assemblage consisting of multiple components which forms a part of other assemblages, a book can no longer be conceptualized as a "container" precisely because it is "full of holes through which connections can be made to others" (214). Thus, Briggs argues, "[o]ne ... is entirely the wrong number for a book, which is always simultaneously more than one (a

[5] Briggs explains that he privileges the term 'fiction' rather than 'literature' "because it more easily enables an association of literariness with the order(s) of nonidentity, whereas a certain

multiplicity) and less than one (a part)" (215). Following Deleuze and Guattari, Briggs claims that certain ways of reading and interpretation that insist on identifying the book as singular, as one, "whether it be through the attribution of an interiority, an ontology, an origin, a destination" (215), are symptomatic of an "arborescent", as opposed to "rhizomatic" model of thought. Arborescent thought "imposes the verb 'to be', but the fabric of the rhizome is the conjunction, 'and ... and ... and ...'", a conjunction which "carries enough force to shake and uproot the verb 'to be' " (215).

> Where are you going? Where are you coming from? What are you heading for? These are totally useless questions. Making a clean slate, starting or beginning again from ground zero, seeking a beginning or a foundation – all imply a false conception of voyage and movement [...]. But [...there is] another way of traveling and moving: proceeding from the middle, through the middle, coming and going rather than starting and finishing. American literature, and already English literature [...] know how to move between things, establish a logic of the AND, overthrow ontology, do away with foundations, nullify endings and beginnings (215).

The problem of the book then, Briggs argues, "might be addressed better by Paul Auster's *The New York Trilogy* ... than by a practice of (philosophical) thought or writing that is governed by identity" (216). One might suppose Briggs selected *The New York Trilogy* because Auster's work has commonly been read as a fiction primarily concerned with the problem of identity. Such a reading however, despite focusing on the problem of identity, still constitutes an arborescent reading insofar as it attempts to uncover what Auster's book *is about*, still a reading "in terms of beginnings and ends", a reading in quest of "themes, intentions, and other forms of interiority" that would impart a sense of unity to the work[6]. "From within the strictures of this system," Briggs points out "it makes little difference whether what is identified is the continuity of theme, story, and

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concept of literature would figure literature as an order of truth" (223).

[6] Incidentally, Auster is mentioned in *House of Leaves* as the author of a "short internal monologue" dramatising Karen Green's terrified response to the house (522). This piece, entitled "Ribbons" is, of course, entirely fictional.

character, or the continuous problems of identity and purpose themselves" (217). In order to break from the arborescent reading that privileges interiority, one must learn "[to] read rhizomatically: to prevent the settling of the beginning and the end one must "proceed from the middle," follow "lines of flight," "overthrow ontology," "establish a logic of the AND." If we are to follow Deleuze and Guattari's advice, it is necessary to *produce* the multiple, the nonidentical, and not just to "discover" it. That is, it is necessary for reading to become fiction" (217-18).

Not unlike Auster's *New York Trilogy*, the book *House of Leaves* is both "an assemblage of multiple components", and "a part within other assemblages"; a book that cannot be conceived as a container and "reduced to the form of identity" because it is "full of holes through which connections can be made to others" (214). This is slyly suggested by the book's playful index, which includes a large number of words belonging to grammatical categories that are not normally indexed, for instance the prepositions "inside" (680-681), "outside" (690) and the common noun "death" (672). In the *Critique* interview, Danielewski observes that his unusual index "allows you to suddenly start asking questions about books you normally wouldn't think about in these terms. Wouldn't it be nice to have an easy way to find out how many *ands* appear in a Faulkner book or the King James? Or how many *fors* appear in a Virginia Woolf novel? Do they vary? What do these signs of reoccurrence reveal? Maybe nothing at all, but it brings that question to mind. And any feature of a book that invites readers to ask different sorts of questions is valuable" ("Haunted House" 119). More than simply an elaborate postmodern joke aimed at deconstructing the understood conventions of indexical structure, then, Danielewski's index serves to highlight and represent statistically a number of (teasingly?) significant stylistic habits; the reader is invited to ponder the re-occurrence of certain words, why some words are indexed and not others, and to examine the different contexts within which the given words appear. Hence the fact that the conjunction "and" (665) is indexed and shown to permeate nearly the entire text (as it might reasonably be expected to) can hardly be considered insignificant; it seems to suggest that, like Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome, the fabric of *House of Leaves* is the conjunction "and ... and ... and ...", a conjunction which uproots the verb 'to be'. What

is more, words such as "denounce", "donkey", and "snowball" that apparently did not feature in the text at all, are listed as "DNE", which can stand alternatively for "Does Not Exist" or (perhaps more appropriately with respect to Navidson's house) "Do Not Enter". These entries play out (paradoxical) inversions of inside/outside and presence/absence: by inscribing in the index their absence from the 'main' body of the text they paradoxically become a presence within the book. Furthermore, if these words indeed 'do not exist' within the covers of the book they must therefore point to some reality *outside* of it, perhaps – given its brazenly intertextual status – the content of other books. As a system of reference then, the index, and by extension *House of Leaves* itself, charts our navigation of, and the relations between, bound embodiments of language, and as such problematizes the notion of the book as a self-enclosed system of meaning.

Constituted thus as a multiplicity, the title *House of Leaves* refers simultaneously to three nonidentical editions, none of which can be privileged over any other as the "original" or more "authentic" edition. First published in 2000 by Pantheon Press, *House of Leaves* appeared simultaneously in two different editions: the "blue" edition, in which the word "house" appears in blue type throughout[7], and the "red" edition, in which the word "minotaur" and all struck passages appear in red type. Later a "black and white" edition appeared, and although this does not include color the word "house" is printed in a lighter font than the rest of the text, lending it a gray appearance. As such, *House of Leaves* is designed to resist the ideology of traditional textual criticism, the methodology of which attempts to reconstruct from different editions and versions a single, and definitive copy text that best expresses the author's final intention. Hayles explains:

> The desire to suppress unruliness and multiplicity in search of an ideal "work" is deeply embedded in textual criticism. However the criteria facilitating this convergence are defined, textual editors have largely agreed that convergence is the ideal ... Not arriving at a single authoritative text, editors argue, risks

[7] This blue script, so suggestive of an Internet hyperlink, reinforces the significance of the reading I am proposing here, since like a rhizomatic reading, navigating the Internet is a fluid form of reading which effectively nullifies beginnings and endings. For a consideration of the similarities

> stranding the reader with a rat's nest of complexly interrelated variants, thus foisting onto her the Sisyphean labor of sorting through the mess and arriving at a sensible reading text that most readers would prefer to have handed to them. Readers in this view want a text they can take more or less at face value so they can get on with the work of interpreting its meaning and explicating its artistic strategies. Here the comparison of editing with translation is especially apt, for the editor, like the translator, *makes innumerable decisions that can never be fully covered by an explicit statement of principles*. As McGann points out, these decisions inevitably function as interpretations, for they literally construct the text in ways that foreground some interpretive possibilities and suppress others ("Translating Media" 268, emphasis added).

In editing Zampanò's manuscript Johnny faces the difficult task of integrating the old man's divergent drafts and notes into a single unified text, the difficulty of this task compounded by the fact that Zampanò's unruly assemblage of texts are inscribed on everything from "old napkins", to the "tattered edges of an envelope" and the "back of a postage stamp." (xvii) Zampanò's text, like its topic, is "uneasily contained" (3). Thus the reader/interpreter of *House of Leaves* is placed in a similar position to that of Johnny in his role as editor/translator of Zampanò's manuscript, since Danielewski's book is itself an inherently divergent work, a "distributed phenomena that becomes stronger, not weaker, because it refuses to converge at a single site or into a single set of words" (Jessica Pressman, "Technotextuality" no pagination).

The differences between the three editions are more than mere embellishments, superfluous frills that could be added or subtracted without compromising the book's integrity and 'wholeness'. As Martin Brick has demonstrated, Danielewski's use of color plays a crucial role in each edition's signifying practices. Thus it may be tempting to suppose, for example, that the absence of blue rubric script from the other two editions means that they are 'deficient' in significant semantic content demonstrably present in the

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between hypertextual literature, the World Wide Web, and Deleuze and Guattari's theorization of the rhizome, see George P. Landow *Hypertext 2.0*, 38-42.

blue edition. The problem with such a reading, however, lies precisely in its privileging of the blue edition as a kind of copy text, a move that facilitates a reading of the other two editions as divergent from its ideal, and therefore to some extent less "authentic" texts. Yet the red edition can also be positioned as the copy text and the other two as "secondary" or "subordinate" texts insofar as its red rubric print inscribes meanings unique to that edition. And the same holds true for the black and white edition. Despite its lack of color – indeed because of it – it constitutes a significantly different, and perhaps more "traditional", book than either of the two color editions. If situated as the primary text this edition may promote, for instance, a reading in the effects of the importation of color into a "traditional" print novel, as if the presence of color in the red and blue versions were a secondary, somewhat frivolous, addition as opposed to a integral component of the novel's textual constitution. Nevertheless, none of the three editions can – or should – be privileged over any other as a more "authentic" or more fully realized version of some supposedly singular book entitled *House of Leaves*. What we have is quite literally three nonidentical "texts" all sharing the same title[8]. "The nonidentity of fiction," Briggs observes, "does not mark a doubling or multiplication of identity, or a divergence from it, but is rather a multiplicity of nonidentity ... a multiplicity without (any) identity" (215-216). The situation is complicated further, however, since prior to its print publication Danielewski posted portions of his book on the Internet in PDF format[9]. This gives us four nonidentical versions. Thus like Navidson's house (itself a metaphor for the possible space of the text), the cluster of texts that constitute *House of Leaves* has no 'center' or copy text that would serve to ground the play of nonidentical editions. The idea that *House of Leaves* is a singular 'book' possessing an intrinsic unity is manifestly a fiction, so to speak.

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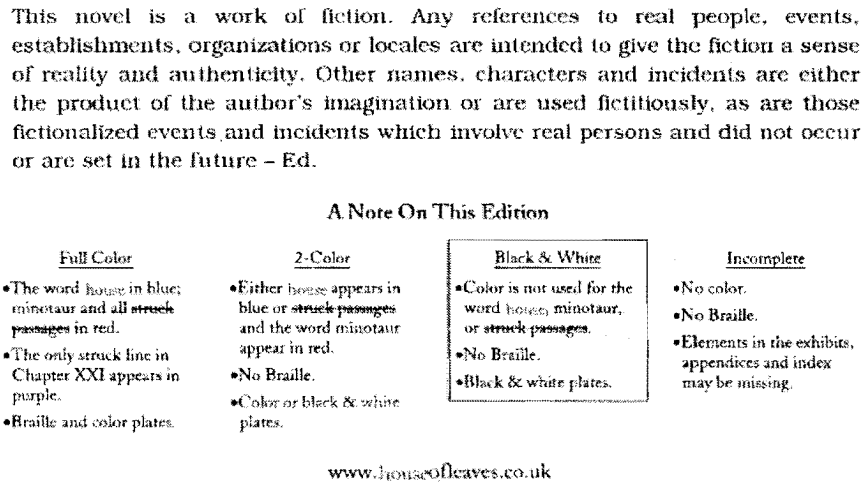
[8] These techniques suggest that Milorad Pavic's *Dictionary of the Khazars: a Lexicon Novel in 100,000 words* (1988) may have influenced Danielewski. Like *House of Leaves*, Pavic's novel rethinks the possibilities of the contemporary print book by forsaking traditional linear form in favour of an elaborately patterned dictionary format that allows for multiple, non-hierarchical entry and exit points and divergent reading paths. The novel is divided into three sections that are color-coded red, yellow and green to represent the Christian, Islamic and Jewish parts of the dictionary respectively. Pavic's novel is also available in two nonidentical "male" and "female" editions, which differ by some seventeen crucial lines.

[9] For an insightful discussion of the implications of Danielewski using PDF as opposed to HTML files for the presentation of his novel online, see Martin Brick's "Blueprint(s)".

The copyright material in *House of Leaves* further reinforces the idea of the book as a multiplicity of nonidentity. A "Note" on the copyright page of each print version lists the various editions and the divergences between them, and a black box surrounds the edition on the list the reader holds in their hand (see Figure 2).



This novel is a work of fiction. Any references to real people, events, establishments, organizations or locales are intended to give the fiction a sense of reality and authenticity. Other names, characters and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, as are those fictionalized events and incidents which involve real persons and did not occur or are set in the future – Ed.

A Note On This Edition

Full Color	2-Color	Black & White	Incomplete
•The word house in blue; minotaur and all ~~struck passages~~ in red.	•Either house appears in blue or ~~struck passages~~ and the word minotaur appear in red.	•Color is not used for the word house, minotaur, or ~~struck passages~~.	•No color.
•The only struck line in Chapter XXI appears in purple.	•No Braille.	•No Braille.	•No Braille.
•Braille and color plates.	•Color or black & white plates.	•Black & white plates.	•Elements in the exhibits, appendices and index may be missing.

www.houseofleaves.co.uk

Figure 2: "A Note On This Edition" from the Black & White edition of *House of Leaves*

Although few readers will pause to read this note before passing directly to the main text, it is not insignificant, since the "full color" edition (an edition including both blue and red coloration) and the "incomplete" edition are in fact apocryphal, like the *Navidson Record* documentary whose existence Johnny attempts to verify. In positioning this spurious note here, Danielewski subverts the traditionally understood conventions of the copyright page, mobilizing it as part of his book's signifying practices. The copyright page is part of what Genette would term the work's paratext, the particular set of inscriptions – such as dedications, epigraphs, and prefaces – surrounding or supplementing a text without being part of the 'work as such'. For Genette,

> The paratext is what enables a text to become a book and to be offered as such to its readers and, more generally, to the public. More than a boundary or a sealed

> border, the paratext is, rather, a *threshold*, or – a word Borges used apropos of a preface – a "vestibule" that offers the world at large the possibility of either stepping inside or turning back. It is an "undefined zone" between the inside and the outside, a zone without any hard and fast boundary on either the inward side (turned toward the text) or the outward side (turned toward the world's discourse about the text), an edge [...](*Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* 1-2).

As an inscription of 'real-world' publication facts, the front matter occupies the paratext's outermost side, part of the world's discourse aimed at monitoring, regulating, and containing the text. The function of the copyright page is to close the text, with text understood here, following Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman, as "finite provinces of meaning, enclaves within the paramount reality marked by circumscribed meanings and modes of experience" (cited in Packman, 43). But the presence of a fictional note here subverts its function as a border between text and nontext and contaminates the integrity of its factual information. Moreover, in blue editions of the novel, the publishing company "Random House" is inscribed on the copyright page in the same blue print used to highlight the word "house" throughout the "main" body of the text. Danielewski's house then, like the fictional world of Tlön in Borges's story, seems to be insidiously absorbing the real world into itself, thereby destabilizing the ontological distinction between the text as a "finite province of meaning" and the "paramount reality." By printing this fictional note on the copyright page, Danielewski further underscores the fact that writing cannot be contained within the bounds of the print book.

And there's more. A few months after the release of *House of Leaves* Pantheon published separately an expanded version of the correspondence Pelafina Lièvre wrote to her son Johnny (Appendix II-E of the novel) as *The Whalestoe Letters* (2000). This supplemental work (Danielewski refers to it as a novella) introduces a new framing-character in one Walden D. Wyhrta, while the eleven additional letters themselves provide a more complex story of Pelafina's slide into insanity than does the fairly linear account of the novel. Thus, *The Whalestoe Letters* forms part of, and yet remains nonidentical with, *House of Leaves*. Danielewski's textual assemblage also includes

works in different media. As noted above, there is considerable evidence to suggest that Danielewski lifted the character of Zampanò from Fellini's *La Strada*, and that his novel, set after the events of this film, recounts the fictional future of this imaginary character. Fellini's film therefore forms a part of the cluster of texts that constitute *House of Leaves* as it supplies significant background information on this character not found within the novel itself. (Reading *La Strada* through the lens of *House of Leaves*, moreover, significantly alters our perception of the film, inflecting its plot with a greater sense of inevitability and doom while painting Fellini's Zampanò as a much more sympathetic character).

And still more connections can be made. American editions of *House of Leaves*, for instance, feature a blown-in card advertising *Haunted* (2000), a concept album by the author's sister Annie Danielewski, better known as the singer-songwriter Poe. Poe designed *Haunted* as a musical companion piece to her brother's novel and thematically the two works are intimately connected. The album's liner notes include a footnote that correlates each of its seventeen tracks to specific pages from the book, while the lyrics themselves reference many of its characters and events, with songs such as 'Exploration B', '5 & ½ Minute Hallway', and 'Dear Johnny' providing direct musical commentary on the novel[10]. According to Danielewski, the two works evolved out of a process of

[10] The liner notes also recount how, a few years after the death of their father Tad Danielewski, Mark and Poe discovered a small cardboard box containing a collection of cassette recordings of his voice, an eclectic mix of academic lectures, casual observations on family life, and audio letters to his children. By including extensive digital samples from these tapes, Poe structures her album as a sustained "conversation" with the "ghost" of her late father, creating a spooky musical drama wherein she both quarrels with, and seeks intimacy from, this disembodied voice ("Poe: Biography"). Explicitly drawing a connection between her father's tapes and the manuscript Johnny inherits from Zampanò, Poe states in an online interview that: "[b]oth the album and the book document the process of interacting with the dead ... or the unreachable, through the things, the splinters, they have left behind" ("Poe: Biography"). Music critic David Toop has coined the term "dead zone duets" to denote works of this kind. Through a process he calls "electronic exhumation" the performer or composer is positioned "as a satellite dish (our metaphorical equivalent of the spirit medium) in the wired world." (*Ocean of Sound* 92, 101) For Toop, "The beauty of exploitation overdubs or dead zone duets is their realisation of the potential of studio magic as science fiction, the configurations which our imaginations whisper but our bodies so rarely concede. A great advantage of working with dead people is that their objections, the objections of habit or fixed identity, go unheard. In 1988, James Brown sang in that scorched earth scream of his, "I'm real", but editing equipment and tape speed controls had already (decades ago, in fact) thrown that desperate, insecure claim into doubt" (106).

collaborative exchange, his novel's characters and themes influencing Poe, whose songwriting and music would in turn inspire him and feed back into *House of Leaves*[11]. It is clear then that both conceive of their individual projects as part of a larger work – what I am arguing here constitutes a textual assemblage – that is, "a cluster of related texts that quote, comment upon, amplify, and remediate[12] one another" (Hayles, "Translating Media" 278). The two works endlessly reflect one another; endlessly circulate intensities. For example, Poe's technique of chopping, processing and layering vocal samples to create densely textured sound-worlds remediates (or, if you will, remixes) Danielewski's metatextual use of collage, quotation and "cut-up" techniques. Poe also remediates Danielewski's extensive use of literary echoes into literal acoustic echoes, creating eerie sound hallucinations that hint at the possible madness and schizophrenia of the novel's narrator(s).

The work as assemblage thus requires a radical new conception of authorship. As Hayles explains, the notion of the literary work as a clearly bounded totality possessed of an intrinsic identity "has been deeply influenced by the unitary view of the subject, particularly in the decades when editors sought to arrive at the work by determining an author's 'final intentions'" (279). (As we shall see in the next chapter, this mutually reinforcing relation between the bounded work and the unitary, authoritative subject is exploited by Nabokov as a means by which to exert control over his novel and limit the possible lines of interpretation). Conversely, "[t]he subjectivity implied by the [Work as Assemblage] cannot by any stretch of the imagination be considered unified. Rather, the

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[11] Poe has stated that she and Mark have "... always riffed off (or shall I say ripped off) each other's ideas as writers ...[*House of Leaves* and *Haunted*] converse with each other in very much the same way my brother and I have conversed for years. They converse about the death of a father or a father figure; they converse about the terrors that riddled and finally destroyed our parents' marriage and our home; and they converse about the dangerous journey toward making amends with the voices and events that haunt us both" ("Poe: Biography").

[12] Remediation, a term coined by media theorists Richard Grusin and Jay Bolter, signifies the process by which material presented in one media is transposed and mediated into the specific terms of another. This cycling through media is occurring all around us, a process developed and accelerated by the emergence of new digital technologies of reproduction. Advances in computer graphics, for instance, have allowed video games to resemble movies, at the same time as digitally animated film resemble games; websites simulate the look of traditional print books, and print books use unusual textual layout to mimic that of web design. See Grusin and Bolter, *Remediation: Understanding New Media*, and Hayles, *Writing Machines*.

subjects producing it are multiple in many senses, both because they are collectives in and among themselves, and also because they include non-human as well as human actors" (279-80). The assemblage of texts that constitute *House of Leaves*, then, involves multiple authors (Danielewski, Poe, even Fellini), as well as the various non-human technologies of inscription that help bring it into being. This would include, for instance, the digital recording technology Pro Tools, and, a propos the edition of *House of Leaves* posted on the internet, the software programs that produced, processed and displayed the text.

In following the imperatives of Deleuze and Guattari, one must "proceed from the middle," "follow lines of flight," produce multiple connections in order to "nullify endings and beginnings." As the aim of this reading strategy is to produce the multiple, not discover it, interpretation must become fiction. The critic should strive, in the words of Oscar Wilde, "to see the object as in itself it really is not."[13] To suggest, therefore, that this rhizomatic reading is exhaustive and final rather than provisional and partial (in every sense of that word) would be to betray its very purpose, and the status of the book as textual assemblage. Like Navidson's endlessly shifting labyrinth, which grows and shrinks in response to an individual's mental state, Danielewski's *House of Leaves* grows and shrinks according to the singular desires of the reader that quite literally *construct* (or, perhaps more accurately, *build*) the text in ways that foregrounds some elements of the assemblage while suppressing others. Thus, as George Landow observes, the work as textual assemblage is oriented "directly to performance, to interaction" (*Hypertext 2.0* 41). Then again, an arborescent reading of *House of Leaves* as a unified work containing themes and intentions traceable to an identifiable author would appear to be as equally fictitious as a rhizomatic reading that would seek to construct it as a multiplicity of nonidentity without an identifiable beginning and ending.

The work as textual assemblage provides an alternative to the closure of the traditional print novel. With *House of Leaves,* it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to

[13] Cited in the preface to *Doom Patrols*, an online book that author Steven Shaviro describes as a "theoretical fiction about postmodernism."

determine where the text physically "ends." So unlike, say, the detective novel, there is no final page the reader can flip to to find the solution to the mystery. *House of Leaves*'s status as an assemblage of distributed texts, as well as the non-teleological reading paths available to the reader within "the novel per se," allows for forms of reading that escape the death-drive of closure and the linearity of an unfolding plotline. Since, as Hansen has observed, *House of Leaves* "always yield[s] one more singular experience each time it is read" (606), Danielewski's novel foregrounds the limitations of closure while simultaneously eliciting "new forms of pleasure, pleasure not from the inevitability of an ending, but from the multiplicity of openings" ("The Electronic Labyrinth: Closure" no pagination).

How, then, can I 'end' my rhizomatic reading of Danielewski's book other than by acknowledging that it too must ultimately amount to a fiction, an engineered projection that reflects – however obliquely – the particular desires and fears of the interpreter? As we have seen, Danielewski encourages the reader to consider his book as a site of personal projection. So perhaps it is not so surprising that my critical reading should wind up being to a certain extent fictional (even obliquely autobiographical?), since as Zampanò remarks: "[i]t would seem the language of objectivity can never adequately address the reality of place on Ash Tree lane" (378-79), or the book that house represents.

Chapter 2: Authorial Tyranny in Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire*

> "[N]ovels of the sixties serve as powerful critical fables for critics of the seventies, and eighties, and beyond, fables about conventions of criticism both old and new. Especially of interest [is] the relationship between creative writer and critic, sometimes articulated forcefully as a rivalry in the last decade."
>
> – Marianna Torgovnick[1]

Nabokov's authorial tyranny remains a central problem in much recent *Pale Fire* criticism. Simply put, how can one provide new and innovative interpretations of a text that, in the words of J. P Shute, "declares itself invulnerable to other discourses that might wish to invade it, to infiltrate it, to filch its quiddity"? ("Nabokov and Freud" 641). The obstinate and somewhat mysterious influence Nabokov continues to exert over his critics has resulted in a great deal of insular criticism wherein the interpreter remains forever locked within the text, endlessly tracing correlations between poem and commentary in an effort to unearth some ever-elusive meaning Nabokov is believed to have secreted deep within its inky depths. Partly because of this, and partly because of what Jill LeRoy-Frazier calls a "fundamental anxiety" about and resistance to, post-structuralist theories of language and meaning (a subject to which we will return), Nabokovian criticism remains to this day squarely author-centered ("Playing a Game of Worlds" 312-13).

In his essay "*Pale Fire*: The near-tyranny of the author" (1999), Maurice Couturier confronts the problem of Nabokov's "tyranny" head on, persuasively arguing that the power struggle between the creative writer and critic forms not only the subject but also the central structuring principle of *Pale Fire*. If modern novels such as Joyce's *Ulysses* are "largely open structurally" and encourage a creative response from the reader, Couturier argues, Nabokov's text remains "hermetically locked" and "durably reader-resistant" (54). He rightly characterizes *Pale Fire* as "a highly daunting text which forces the reader to enter its black box and compels him to try and recompose or refigure it in an attempt to free himself from it" (61). Couturier's choice of metaphor is significant here. The term "black box" commonly denotes an enigmatic apparatus or contraption with unknown or unspecified components. Forced to enter

[1] Marianna Torgovnick, "Nabokov and his Successors" 24.

this inscrutable black box – the tight fuselage-world of the Nabokovian text – the reader/interpreter must struggle valiantly to escape it. Couturier's description of *Pale Fire* as a hermetically sealed "black box" thus stands in contradistinction to Danielewski's novel and its synecdochal "blue box" which serves, as we have seen, as a site of projection for the reader, a scene of their involvement in the text. Whereas Danielewski's blue box points up the novel's status as open-work and foregrounds the reader's participation in the text and the process of meaning making, Couturier's black box metaphor accurately reflects the cryptic nature of *Pale Fire* and Nabokov's assertion of absolute authority over the text and its meaning. In a similar vein, John Updike claims that Nabokov, like Beckett and Borges, "makes fine airtight boxes, like five-foot plastic cubes in a Minimal Art show, all inner-reflection and shimmer, perfectly self-contained, detached from even the language of their composition" (cited in David Packman, *Vladimir Nabokov: the Structure of Literary Desire* 95). Updike criticizes these writers because their works do not make sufficient contact with "reality". "The boxes" he states, "must have holes where reality can look out and readers can look in" (95). Without this reciprocating channel to "reality", such texts inevitably remain closed and resistant to readerly interpretation.

In this reading then, Nabokov wants to claim total control of his text and its meaning. Hence, he quite explicitly constructs his novel as an infernal "black box" or prison-labyrinth in an attempt to ensnare and confuse critics who would otherwise assert mastery over his text and appropriate it to a totalitarian hermeneutic grid that for Nabokov would destroy its delicate, multicolored tissue. In one of the novel's more self-referential passages, Nabokov makes explicit this connection between text and labyrinth:

> Aristotle! – Ah, there would be a man to talk with! What satisfaction to see him take, like reins from between his fingers, the long ribbon of man's life and trace it through the mystifying maze of all the wonderful adventure.... The crooked made straight. The Daedalian plan simplified by a look from above – smeared out as it were by the splotch of master thumb that made the whole involuted, boggling thing one beautiful straight line (205-06).

And it is, of course, Nabokov who claims to occupy this unassailable position of authority from "above", who claims to have or be the god-like "master thumb" capable of straightening out *Pale Fire*, smoothing its numerous textual knots and enigmas into "one beautiful straight line." Richard Rorty, (unconsciously?) invoking the reversible figure of the labyrinth, cogently sums up the situation thus:

> The reason it is going to be relatively hard to turn [*Pale Fire*] into a classic is that we guardians of legitimacy, we servants of reality, can only make sound observations about a novel, find admirable illustrations of general truths in it, if we can get it under control. *We need to stand at a distance from it in order to see it steadily and whole.* But Nabokov arranges things so that, just when we thought that we had stepped back and found the proper standpoint from which to see his book in perspective, we get an uncanny sense that the book is looking at us from a considerable distance, and chuckling. ("Introduction" x, emphasis added)

In other words, Nabokov, a Daedalian artificer *par excellence*, has designed an intricate, labyrinthine text that induces confusion and disorientation for those trapped within; only when it is transcended and seen from above and in its entirety can its apparent chaos be converted to dazzling artistry and its pattern and meaning discerned. Yet few critics claim to have successfully navigated its convoluted pathways and gained, as it were, a privileged and stable viewpoint from above that would make sense of the pattern and meaning of the whole. Rather, as David Rampton observes, "Nabokov's marvelous labyrinth" has proven to be a successful trap for many unwary critics who, lost in its textual maze, "blunder along passageways which often turn out to be dead-ends" (*Vladimir Nabokov: a Critical Study of the Novels* 160). More specifically, Nabokov's teasing suggestion that *Pale Fire* has a single, dominant voice is the most elaborate way he has asserted control over the interpretation of his text, and imprisoned his critics within the novel's black box. To see exactly how this is done, a brief summary of *Pale Fire* is in order.

The novel consists of John Shade's autobiographical poem "Pale Fire", and a highly idiosyncratic foreword, commentary, and index purportedly authored by Charles Kinbote, Shade's neighbor and colleague at Wordsmith College, New Wye.

Kinbote's *apparatus criticus* is not the scholarly work it professes to be, however. Rather, like Johnny's commentary on 'The Navidson Record', it too is an autobiographical text that bears, initially at least, little resemblance to its ostensible object of study. Kinbote, we discover, may in fact be Charles Xavier, the exiled king of a northern European land known as Zembla. In his commentary, then, Kinbote willfully misreads 'Pale Fire' so that Shade's autobiographical poem appears really to be a veiled account of his own remembered life as King Charles. On a first reading, then, Shade's poem and Kinbote's commentary seem to have little in common. Further investigation, however, reveals a large number of correspondences between them; despite their obvious incongruities, the two texts emerge as refracted images of each other. Thus the question naturally arises as to who is responsible for this elaborately woven network of echoes and allusions. Simply put, do Shade and Kinbote represent two separate voices in the novel, as creator of poem and commentary respectively, or is there – as the many connections teasingly suggest – a single, dominant voice that is creating both the novel's parts? And if so, whose voice is it, Shade's or Kinbote's? Formulated in one form or another, this question has dominated criticism of *Pale Fire* from Mary McCarthy's acclaimed essay "A Bolt from the Blue" (appearing a few months after the novel's publication) to Brian Boyd's recent magnum opus *Nabokov's* Pale Fire*: the Magic of Artistic Discovery* (1999).

Significantly, critics are diametrically opposed on the question of sole authorship. On the one hand, commentators such as Julia Bader, Andrew Field, and Boyd, argue that Shade writes both poem and commentary; on the other, Page Stegner and D. Barton Johnson maintain that Kinbote is author of the whole thing[2]. As David Packman observes, "[e]ach of these readings involves a decision as to how the text may be framed. Attributing Shade's poem to Kinbote constructs one kind of frame; attributing Kinbote's commentary to Shade constructs another. Meaning is fixed in each case by the position of the frame" (*Vladimir Nabokov: the Structure of Literary Desire* 71). Nevertheless, despite their conflicting conclusions, both readings share the

[2] For the Shadean interpretation see Julia Bader, *Crystal Land: Artifice in Nabokov's Novels*; Andrew Field, *Nabokov: His Life in Art*; andBrian Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years*. For the Kinbotean argument see Page Stegner, *Escape into Aesthetics: The Art of Vladimir Nabokov*; and D. Barton Johnson, "The Index of Refraction in Nabokov's *Pale Fire*."

same fundamental interpretative methodology, a methodology that has delimited and 'fixed' the horizon of interpretive possibilities within which *Pale Fire* is read today. Both readings decide to reconfigure the text as the work of a single, controlling presence. This central presence functions as a Foucauldian 'unity of discourse' that imparts a sense of unity to the novel's disparate parts and effaces their contradictions. In this reading, then, *Pale Fire* is seen as a clearly delineated totality of meaning where the *logos* – in this case, a central, authoritative presence – circumscribes and controls the play of textual inscription.

In the struggle to make Nabokov's unorthodox novel "conform to the standards of an authoritative central presence and a grounding in a recognizable reality," commentators are therefore also "forced to choose between Shade and New Wye, or Kinbote and the Kingdom of Zembla, as the norm from which the other represents a fictional deviation" (LeRoy-Frazier, "Playing a Game of Worlds" 311-12). For example, Shadean interpretations are content to read Kinbote's commentary as merely "an inflated, referentless fable," privileging Shade as the dominant voice and thus New Wye as the novel's primary 'reality' (Couturier, "The near-tyranny of the author" 63). If *Pale Fire* is read along realist lines, then reductive interpretations are inevitable, since from the perspective of traditional realism Shade's earthly, 'realistic' New Wye and Kinbote's fabulous romance kingdom of Zembla cannot both be afforded the same 'truth' status within the novel's fictional universe. In these terms, the two worlds are simply incommensurable.

If, as Boccaccio said, "labyrinthine art begets a hermeneutic labyrinth" (cited in Doob, 215), then the sheer volume of criticism on the problem of authorship in *Pale Fire* surely constitutes such a hermeneutic labyrinth. Moreover, this critical history exhibits one of the characteristic features of the labyrinth as Penelope Reed Doob sees it – that is, the quality of reversible judgment. Just as our perception of labyrinths is intrinsically unstable – change your perspective and the labyrinth appears to change – 'definitive' critical interpretations of Nabokov's labyrinthine novel have proven similarly unstable and reversible. For example Boyd, once "the staunchest proponent" of the Shadean reading, has recently renounced his adherence to this interpretation (*The Magic of Artistic Discovery*, 4). In his radical new reading, Shade and Kinbote emerge again as two separate voices; nevertheless, Shade remains the dominant voice

of the novel since, so Boyd contends, he controls and guides the composition of Kinbote's text through a ghostly possession of his commentator. Even in this "radical" new reading, then, *Pale Fire*'s elusive 'meaning' is still understood to hinge on uncovering and identifying the voice that dominates the book. Again, this critical imperative arises from the subtle ways in which the poem and commentary echo and mirror each other, thus hinting at some ultimate design behind them. As Alvin Kernan succinctly puts it, "everything in the 'plexed artistry' of the novel seems to lead on to everything else and *to tease us with the possibility* of a completely articulated structure which, if understood, will allow us to fly through the barrier of the text into a meaning beyond" (cited in Boyd, 115, emphasis added).

But more than forty years after the novel's publication the controversial debate over who invented whom, and the concomitant question of whether Shade's New Wye or Kinbote's Zembla is the novel's primary 'reality', remain unresolved. One thing, at least, is clear: the special density of the Nabokovian text is such that it can accommodate both interpretations. Therefore this thorny issue, together with the novel's multilingual puns, anagrammatic signatures, riddles, and word-games, all encourage the reader to question the author and his intentions; they continually point beyond the different authorial masks to Nabokov the man and his final authority as the designer of both the novel's parts. The decision to read *Pale Fire* in quest of a controlling voice reinforces the view of Nabokov evident in much of the criticism. That is to say, the idea of Nabokov the masterful stylist always exerting full control over every element of his texts, and the idea that *Pale Fire* has a controlling, authoritative voice that it is the job of criticism to uncover, mutually reinforce and determine each other. And this, of course, is just what Nabokov wants. As Couturier says, Nabokov "claims emphatically that the reader will never be able to crack all the novel's secrets without his help, that he is or has the final key that can open all the doors" (71). Thus, the question of authorship emerges, finally, as the most elaborate way Nabokov strives to assert control over his text and programme our responses to it. What is more, critics for the most part have been reluctant to read the novel innovatively for fear of reproducing Kinbote's unscholarly manoeuvres, thus choosing instead the more conventional approach of reading in quest of the author's 'intentions'. Consequently, as Rampton observes, in *Pale Fire* criticism "there has been no momentous 'death of the author' and no consequent 'freedom for the critic"

(164). As a result, many of Nabokov's exegetes remain forever imprisoned within the novel's black box, endlessly annotating the text from within (rather than actively interpreting it), seeking to refigure the disparate parts as the product of a single, authoritative presence, that elusive final signified or "devilish key" that would "open all the doors" (Couturier, "The near-tyranny of the author" 54, 71).

The exhaustive debate over whether Shade or Kinbote is the controlling author of the text arises from the fact that critics persist in reading *Pale Fire* from the normative standards of classic realism; that is, it is precisely this critical position that generates the problem itself. Nabokov of course invites such readings since they ultimately point back to his final authority as 'author'; indeed, he programs them into the structure of *Pale Fire* to control the way in which his text is read. However, Nabokov's concept of 'reality' as an artificial construct in fact compromises the validity of such traditional realist-oriented accounts and thus by extension actually weakens his claims to hermeneutic control. In other words, the implications of Nabokov's rejection of consensual reality open up possibilities for new readings that free us from Nabokov's tyranny and allow us to escape the black box of the text.

For Nabokov as for Danielewski, all texts enter into a dialogue with the literary past. As such, *Pale Fire* cannot be conceptualized as a hermetically sealed black box precisely because it is full of gaps through which connections can be made to other texts. Therefore, in what follows I approach *Pale Fire* not as a rigidly organized and coherent totality producing one dominant reading but as an assemblage of textual fragments capable of generating any number of effects. "The components of an assemblage," as Packman observes, "need to be read in relation to each other, not in isolation" (78). Thus unlike Updike and many of Nabokov's exegetes I consider *Pale Fire* "not as a reified aesthetic object", an impenetrable black box, but rather as a "site of potential encounters" (Packman, *Vladimir Nabokov: The Structure of Literary Desire* 2). Reading *Pale Fire* alongside *House of Leaves*, then, I adopt an interpretive strategy that allows the two novels to speak to each other, in the hope of stimulating new and innovative interpretations. Danielewski's novel – an iteration of Nabokov's pioneering metafictional form for our post-structuralist, post-modern world – can help bring into focus the points of instability latent in the unique structure of Nabokov's novel, and by extension the blind-spots of previous Nabokovian criticism. That is to

say, *House of Leaves* retrospectively allows us to see, in the interpretive restrictions *Pale Fire* erects, the possibility for new, *disobedient* readings that examine what Nabokov sought to suppress, and why. Following Deleuze and Guattari then, I ask, "in connection with what other things" Nabokov's novel "does or does not transmit intensities, in which other multiplicities its own are inserted and metamorphosed" (*A Thousand Plateaus* 4).

Reality and Postmodern Time

> How can I put it? Life is like video footage –
> Hard to edit, directors, they never understood it
> – The Wu-Tang Clan, 'Reunited'

Jill LeRoy-Frazier is the only critic to have adequately addressed Nabokov's rejection of the concept of an 'absolute reality', and the implications of this rejection for the received critical views of *Pale Fire*. As she rightly observes, the critical impulse to uncover a controlling voice in the novel and a grounding in an identifiable 'reality' "arises from a set of faulty critical assumptions based upon Nabokov's own conception of art's purpose and function that entail a negation of at least some of the possible implications of his views" (312). This negation involves a curious critical resistance to post-structuralist ideas concerning the instability of language, specifically its inability to convey us beyond the realm of the signifier. Thus Shadean and Kinbotean readings, founded as they are in a recognizable reality,

> ignore the possibility that *Pale Fire* might be questioning the very constitution of the "reality" upon which such a paradigm rests. Elsewhere, Nabokov has declared that there is no such thing as recognizable or everyday reality in which to be grounded in the first place. Rather, reality is a "very subjective affair," a "gradual accumulation of information" that the individual mind must process and synthesize in order to create his or her own version of the world. The notion of an everyday reality is faulty because it "presupposes a situation that is permanently observable, essentially objective, and universally known"; in Nabokov's conception, one must make creative and associative links between pieces of information in order to compile a picture of the world. The

> individual formulation of one's reality will never correspond directly to anyone else's; hence the belief in the existence of a common ground of experience to which everyone can refer is itself a fiction (312).

Therefore Nabokov's rejection of an everyday reality means that "in a universe in which there is no standard or norm to deviate from in the first place, it is impossible, and unnecessary, to prove that New Wye is any more real than Zembla," or conversely, that Zembla is more real (or no less real) than New Wye (313). The two worlds are equally real or, as it were, equally fictional.

In *House of Leaves*, of course, the absence of a grounding reality is more explicitly legible. Reading *Pale Fire* through the lens of Danielewski's novel can therefore provide a more accurate picture of the text than those readings that attempt to posit within the novel a primary 'reality' behind the play of textual representation. Analogous to the structure of *Pale Fire*, what we are presented with in *House of Leaves* is a palimpsest of densely overlaid writings and readings. There is the Navidson documentary constructed from film, video, and audio tape; Zampanò's commentary on the film; Johnny's (re)construction of Zampanò's text and the idiosyncratic footnotes he appends to the text; and finally the anonymous 'Editors' supply the further supplemental material found in the exhibits, appendix, and index. The realist novel presents itself as a transparent window of language that unproblematically gives out on to a mimetically faithful representation of 'reality.' Conversely, what we have in *House of Leaves* is a chain of opaque inscriptions, an interminable redoubling of text upon text. Moreover, the Navidson film, which ostensibly sets in motion this chain of supplementary glosses, does not in fact exist; hence there is an absence of any real-world referent that would serve to ground and control the play of supplementary inscription. But as Hayles points out, this does not simply result in absence: rather 'reality' is "evacuated as [an] originary [object] of representation" only to be "reconstituted through multiple layers of remediation" ("Saving the Subject" 782-83). The 'reality' or referent in *House of Leaves* is established as a concept only, one that emerges not behind but through the multiple inscriptions of the various narrators.

A similar dynamic operates in Nabokov's novel. Shade, for example, perceives and transforms the various impressions he receives from his surroundings, transmuting them into the tightly ordered world of his poem. One of the most significant of these impressions is the vision of a luminous fountain he experienced during a near-death experience. Much of the poem relates Shade's quest to validate this striking image as evidence of the existence of an afterlife. He thinks he has found this evidence when he stumbles across a newspaper account of a woman who claims to have witnessed a similar fountain during her own brush with death. As Shade discovers, however, the woman had seen a "mountain", not a "fountain"; what he took to be confirmation of an afterlife thus turns out to be merely a textual misprint. Nevertheless, he recounts this discovery in his poem, and makes use of extensive mountain imagery, concluding that whatever evidence of an afterlife there may be lies not in any empirically verifiable evidence but rather in "topsy-turvical coincidence" (53).

In his turn, Kinbote transmutes this imagery into the specific topography of Zembla:

> Northward melted the green, gray, bluish mountains – Falkberg with its hood of snow, Mutraberg with the fan of its avalanche, Paberg (Mt. Peacock), and others, - separated by narrow dim valleys with intercalated cotton-wool bits of cloud that seemed placed between the receding sets of ridges to prevent their flanks from scraping against one another (116).

These mountains, so vividly evoked here and elsewhere in the commentary, seem to exert a palpable sense of reality in terms at least partly consistent with traditional novelistic mimesis[3]. Yet they are only part of Kinbote's constructed world of Zembla, a simulacrum that emerges through a convoluted series of textual transmissions: Kinbote's commentary derives its mountain imagery from a reference in Shade's

[3] Thus even critics who position Kinbote's Zembla as a fictional deviation from the grounding reality of Shade's New Wye still insist on the former's evocative power, its ability to produce convincing "reality effects." Here, for instance, is Robert Alter: "[Kinbote's] tale of Zembla is manifestly a fiction twice removed from the reality in which the reader sits with the book in his hand, but in [the] vividness [of its imagery], ... in the way it manages to correspond through all its farcical gyrations to the ... composite image of a possible European political history, it has a kind of authority, and does not allow us to dismiss it as 'mere' fiction" (*Partial Magic* 193).

poem, a reference that Shade in turn derived from a misprint in a newspaper article that actually read "fountain", not "mountain." As in *House of Leaves*, then, there can be no recourse to some truth or grounding reality in *Pale Fire*, since both Shade's New Wye and Kinbote's Zembla gradually materialize only through a complex process of redoubled and refracted textual inscriptions[4].

Critical readings that attempt to uncover a dominant voice in *Pale Fire* are also negated by Nabokov's rejection of a foundational reality since, as Danielewski's novel makes plain, this rejection inevitably entails a subversion of any hierarchy of textual authority. Criticism, for example, commonly assumes that the texts of Shade and Kinbote are "related to one other as precursor to successor, primary text to secondary" (LeRoy-Frazier, "Playing a Game of Worlds" 314). This assumption has naturally given rise to the prominent Shadean interpretation of the novel. This reading privileges Shade's poem as the novel's primary text, which in turn facilitates a view of Kinbote's commentary as an aberrant deviation. But a different relationship between the texts than that found in the majority of criticism emerges if we recognize the implications of inhabiting a world without a consensual, grounding reality. LeRoy-Frazier again:

> If one of the results of the absence of objective reality is the concurrent release from the perceived constraints of linear time, then within this context it is possible to claim that Shade's text does not necessarily precede Kinbote's as the progenitor to which Kinbote's text owes its existence. To clarify: when creating a version of reality, one is not necessarily required to connect events in linear order. This phenomenon is perhaps most easily understood when thought of in terms of the creation of past reality, or memory ... The mind applies its imaginative powers of association and synthesis to the various recollections that it holds, and formulates a coherent sense of the world as experienced. One's impressions of the past are discrete bits of information that the mind can combine in various ways, irrespective of the linear order in which they were originally perceived to have occurred. As Nabokov sees it,

[4] My analysis of Kinbote's transformation of Shade's mountain reference into the majestic geography of Zembla is indebted to Patrick O'Donnell's brilliant "Watermark: Writing the Self in Nabokov's *Pale Fire*", especially pages 394-395.

> the memory "store[s] up this or that element which creative imagination may want to use when combining it with later recollections and inventions. In this sense, both memory and imagination are a negation of time" (315).

From this perspective, then, it is impossible to place Shade's and Kinbote's texts in an historical order, and thus futile to argue for the historical primacy of one text over the other. Once the constraints of linear time are removed, both texts turn out to be essentially contemporary with one other. "In a linguistic universe," writes LeRoy-Frazier, "*all* texts are secondary, and thus all fictions are equal" (317). Moreover, it is also misguided and pointless trying to prove that either Shade or Kinbote is the dominant voice of the text since both authorial figures are, like the realities they fashion, equally fictional. (The equality of the two texts will be elaborated on in the discussion of Kinbote and supplementarity below). And these textual realities or 'worlds' do not, of course, reflect some fundamental, underlying reality, since for Nabokov, according to LeRoy-Frazier, such a "reality is itself an artificial construct, a synthesis of ruling conventions that is precisely fictional" (312).

Here we need to redress a common critical misapprehension concerning Nabokov's blurring of the distinction between fiction and reality. Robert Alter, for example, whose views have been often echoed in subsequent criticism, writes that the novel's "principal concern" is "how each individual mind filters reality, recreates it [that is, fictionalizes it], and the moral quandaries generated by that problematic of epistemology" (*Partial Magic* 215). Hence for Alter there still exists an objective, underlying reality independent of the mind's necessarily distortive mediations. Alter reads the problematic blurring of fiction and reality in the novel as Nabokov's defense of reality and the endangered standards of engaging fully and responsibly with it.

This reading thus involves a fundamental misrecognition of both the patent 'unreality' of *Pale Fire*'s textual worlds as well as Nabokov's own expressed views on the subject:

> To be sure, there is an average reality, perceived by all of us, but that is not true reality: it is only the reality of general ideas, conventional forms of humdrummery, current editorials, ... Paradoxically, the only real, authentic

> worlds are, of course, those that seem unusual. When my fancies will have been sufficiently imitated, they, too, will enter the common domain of average reality, which will be false, too, but within a new context which we cannot yet guess. Average reality begins to rot and stink as soon as the act of individual creation ceases to animate a subjectively perceived texture (*Strong Opinions*, 118).

Traditionally, Nabokov's exegetes have embarked on a futile quest to uncover behind the novel's play of textual representation a grounding reality congruent with the demands of traditional realism. Yet, as we have already observed, Shade's New Wye and Kinbote's Zembla do not point back to some foundational reality; rather, these textual realities in fact emerge only through a complex superimposition of textual inscriptions. Thus if we are to prevent Nabokov's fantastic worlds from entering into the "common domain of average reality" (here, the normative standards of literary realism), criticism now should strive to reinvest the novel with something like its original "unusualness", should strive to re-animate it with a "subjectively perceived texture." It is the creative distortions, remediations, and deliberate misreadings made by artists influenced by Nabokov that point the way forward in this regard. It might be revealing, then, to submit Nabokov's own expressed view of reality to the same process of superimposition (using these creative distortions) that marks the gradual emergence of the two realities of his novel. In other words, rather than attempting to recuperate Nabokov's view of reality through the values and assumptions of "mimesis", values and assumptions that underpin traditional *critical representation itself*, I will mimic the compositional structure of the novel (just as Johnny mimics that of Zampanò's novel when faced with the impossible task of "representing" the referential void that lies at its heart).

A useful example for this purpose is Canadian horror *auteur* David Cronenberg, the director of such acclaimed films as *The Fly*, *Dead Ringers*, *eXistenZ*, and *Spider*. In interviews, Cronenberg has often spoken of the profound influence Nabokov has exerted on his films and this influence is readily apparent in much of his work. As Mark Browning observes, Cronenberg "literally 'plays' with a number of Nabokovian features, including ludic motifs, the use of *mise-en-abime*, the significance of naming, self-consuming narrative structures," and even "markers of authorial intrusion" in the

form of entomological imagery ("Thou, the Player of the Game, art God" 58, 66)[5]. Nabokov's views on 'reality-creation' are particularly pertinent to Cronenberg's aesthetic. For Cronenberg, filmmakers instantiate Nabokov's concept of reality-as-simulation through their projection of flickering new-worlds upon the blue screen of film production. His own films, therefore, can be read as a creative embodiment of Nabokov's view of reality, a view scholarly criticism of *Pale Fire* is blinkered to by their insistence on reading the novel along realist lines (or in the case of Alter, reading in quest of some moral significance).

In interviews, Cronenberg frequently responds to questions concerning his social responsibility as an artist in what he terms a "Nabokovian way" (Timothy R. Lucas, "David Cronenberg: A Postscript" 12). In particular, Nabokov's view of reality allows him to deflect negative criticism regarding his film's depictions of violence and 'deviant' sexuality, deemed by some as potentially detrimental to social health. Thus, Cronenberg says:

> Nabokov always said that, after all those years spent reinventing Russia, he found himself faced with the prospect of having to reinvent America. What he meant, of course, is that an artist does not deal with 'Reality' (as it is properly known) but in fact has to reinvent everything. Each work is the invention of a world. That's why, when I say there's no such thing as a realistic film – and I do – I'm really only echoing Nabokov, saying there is no such thing as a realistic novel ("David Cronenberg: A Postscript" 11-12, underlining removed).

For Cronenberg as for Nabokov, 'everyday reality' is itself a fiction, an artificial construct:

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[5] Interestingly, Timothy R. Lucas notes "that the major auteurs behind the contemporary horror film are influencing the genre with their personal interests in the writings of Vladimir Nabokov" (10-11). He quotes horror director Joe Dante (*Twilight Zone: the Movie*, *The Howling*) as saying: "Nabokov has almost replaced Brecht for this generation of filmmakers. When people went beyond the realm of film, it was called Brechtian. Today, the same thing is Nabokovian" (10). It is possible to suggest, then, that one of the ways in which Nabokov indirectly influenced Danielewski was through contemporary horror films, since these exerted an obvious influence on the subject matter and form of *House of Leaves*. See Lucas, "David Cronenberg: A Postscript".

> There is no absolute reality. We must, we are forced to, it is our destiny and it is our nature to constantly recreate reality. Sometimes, on a daily basis. [We must learn to talk in terms of reality-creation] rather than talking about burrowing down to or stripping away all falseness and coming to an understanding of absolute reality. There is nothing there. You have to accept the burden of creating your own reality (Ira Nayman, "Definitely a David Cronenberg Film").

Cronenberg is drawn to the fact that Nabokov often relied on cinematic metaphors to describe the pliable nature of memory and by extension 'reality' itself. In *Lolita*, for instance, Humbert is frustrated by the ostensibly fixed sequential order writing imposes upon his memories, and thus yearns after film's flexibility and what he calls its "fantastic simultaneousness" (cited in Robert Stam, *Reflexivity in Film and Literature* 144). Specifically, Humbert wishes he had frozen Lolita's image on film, so that he could freeze her, possess and manipulate her in the present: "That I could have had all her strokes, all her enchantments, immortalized in segments of celluloid, makes me moan to-day with frustration" (cited in Packman, 49). And Hayles observes that in *Ada* Marina's "recollections are distanced in her mind as if she were watching a movie of her past – a movie she intends to edit and rearrange at her convenience" ("Making a Virtue of Necessity" 46). The adaptable nature of memory allows Marina to, as it were, 'redirect' and 'edit' her past endlessly, to create any number of 'false' histories unrestrained by the limits of linear time[6].

Cronenberg's *Spider* (2002) offers itself as an allegory of this process. The film's protagonist is Dennis 'Spider' Cleg, an inmate of a halfway house in 1950s London

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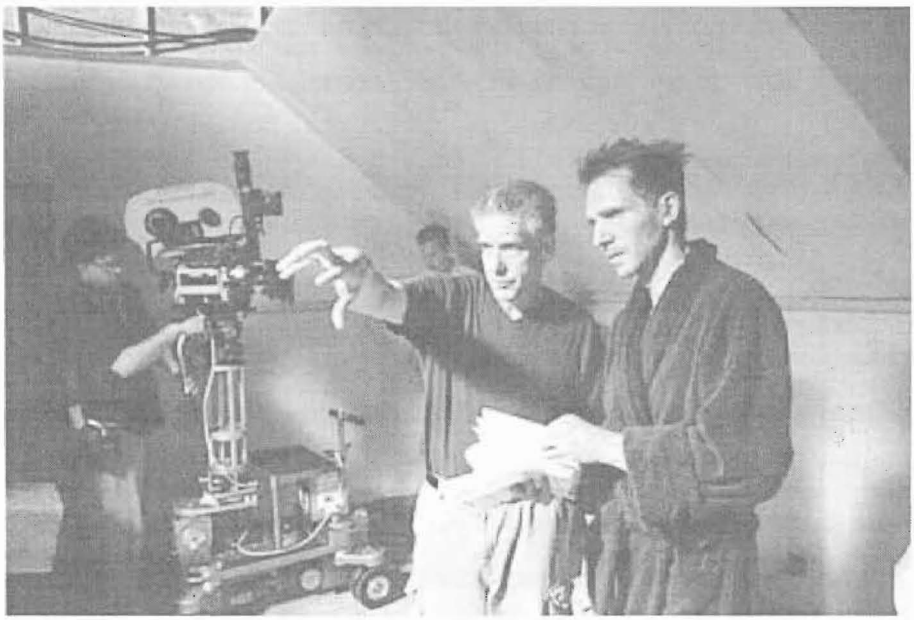
[6] For Dabney Stuart, *Laughter in the Dark* is the Nabokov novel "whose structure, and meaning, depends most pervasively on the motion picture as a form through which the experience of the book is to be perceived and evaluated" (*Nabokov: the Dimensions of Parody* 89). Indeed, the filmic techniques Nabokov employs in this novel are remarkably similar to those used by Danielewski in *House of Leaves*: "The profusion of chapters, their varied lengths, and especially the very brief ones, suggest a scenario. There are stage directions not only for the last scene but also on page 150. Twice the fictional technique suggests the use of a subliminal frame in a motion picture ... The first three chapters make the past present by flashback, and the point of view from which the accident is handled (Chapter 32) suggests the cinematic technique of panning" (94 n9).

who is haunted by traumatic childhood memories, which he incessantly rehearses in an attempt to find coherence in his life. These memory sequences focus on a young Spider and his troubled relationship with his working-class parents. Significantly, the adult Spider is present within these scenes, observing silently from a corner or through a window his childhood self and parents interacting as if he were a director on a movie set, as Cronenberg puts it, "redirecting and rechoreographing his memories" (Andrew O'Hehir, "The Baron of Blood does Bergman"). As the film progresses the line between accurate recall and invention is increasingly blurred, so that memory and 'reality' are revealed as unstable concepts, open to endless revision and redescription irrespective of the linear order in which they are perceived to have occurred. In this way, Cronenberg figures forth his Nabokovian notion of memory or past reality as 'a created thing,' something that we are 'constantly rewriting' and 'redirecting.'



1: David Cronenberg (left) directing Ralph Fiennes on the set of *Spider*

Nabokov's view of reality and memory, thus refracted through the lens of Cronenberg's filmic remediations, emerges as uncannily similar to those of Danielewski. Like Nabokov, Danielewski observes how the malleability of memory allows us to ceaselessly refigure and recreate our past. As he puts it: "we live comfortably because we create these sacred domains in our head where we believe that we have a specific history, a certain set of experiences ... [b]ut memory never

puts us in touch with anything directly; it's always interpretive, reductive, a complicated compression of information" ("Haunted House" 121). Danielewski also uses the process of film editing as a metaphor for the way memory and desire create delusively neat pictures of the past by combining temporally disparate events according to the demands of the present. For example, after escaping from the house Navidson edits and re-edits his documentary footage, manipulating the representation of the traumatic events that took place there according to his present needs and desires. Thus, Zampanò warns his readers on the historical veracity of the 'completed' film:

> [N]ostalgia's role in shaping the final cut [of *The Navidson Record*] must not be forgotten, especially since within a year these pieces were all Navidson had left – Karen and the children a mere blur racing down the staircase, the pointillism of their pets' paw prints caught on the dew covered lawn, or the house itself, an indefinite shimmer, sitting quietly on the corner of Succoth and Ash Tree Lane, bathed in afternoon light (17-8).

Likewise, Shade and Kinbote construct their textual realities from the temporally distinct events of their lives, moving freely back and forth in time for suitable material. This movement is on display in the opening stanzas of Shade's poem. Alfred Appel has described how Nabokov often "begins a narrative only to stop and retell the passage differently, halts a scene to 'rerun' it on the chapter's screen" (cited in Browning 63). Here, Shade performs a similar maneuver. First, he describes the drifting flakes of snow slowly blanketing the patch of lawn visible from his study window, before abruptly declaring: "Retake the falling snow" (29) and the scene is rerun, this time with the falling snow flakes described in exquisite close-up. Then, just as abruptly, he cuts to a view of the same scene the following day:

> And in the morning, diamonds of frost
> Express amazement: Whose spurred feet have crossed
> From left to right the blank page of the road?
> Reading from left to right in winter's code:
> A dot, an arrow pointing back; repeat:
> Dot, arrow pointing back … A pheasant's feet! (29, 19-24)

For Nabokov as for Danielewski, then, the past is never totalized and fixed. Rather, like film footage that can be endlessly edited and re-edited, the past is open always to perpetual revisions and refigurings. This openness is logically assured since all reconstructions of the past are necessarily textualizations of the past, and these textualizations, constructed as they are from empty signifiers, can thus never be permanently stabilized into an immutable or fixed order.

Again, LeRoy-Frazier is useful here. As she explains, "this movement back and forth in linear time" – that is, our ability to endlessly refigure the past – "is possible because ... as Jacques Derrida long ago argued, any use of language necessarily removes us from the teleological Center or *logos* that marks linear time" (316). Thus, it is hopeless trying to place texts in an historical order, since in a purely textual world, all fictions are essentially contemporary with each other, a situation that frees us to position texts in new and innovative configurations:

> Language operates in the mode of blurring the distinction between origin and image, or predecessor and successor – or primary text and secondary text. Movement along the metonymic flows in both directions, for there are no absolute beginning and ending points, no fixed linear order, without teleological time (316).

Hence critical readings that persist in positioning Shade's text as primary and Kinbote's text as secondary involve a fundamental misapprehension of how Nabokov's view on reality and how the concomitant release from teleological thinking impact on the apparent structure of his novel.

Again, reading Nabokov and Danielewski intertextually can help redress this prevalent critical misapprehension. As noted earlier, the peculiar layout of *House of Leaves* foregrounds the temporal simultaneity of Zampanò's and Johnny's texts, which, like Shade's and Kinbote's, are also ostensibly related to one another as primary text to secondary text. Unlike *Pale Fire*, in which the different voices of Shade and Kinbote speak in turn (Shade's poem followed by Kinbote's commentary, suggesting a relationship of precursor text to successor), *House of Leaves* groups the

distinct narratives of Johnny and Zampanò together on the same page, distinguishing them through spatial arrangement and typeface. Through spatial discontinuity, Danielewski visualizes their temporal simultaneity: the reader's eye is forced to shuttle between the two, noting how each text echoes and reverberates against the other, as though Zampanò and Johnny are speaking simultaneously. This unusual use of spatial form simulates the appearance of a multilayered, "ahistorical" palimpsest, an assemblage of documents upon which different hands have worked (Martin Brick, "Blueprint(s)" no pagination).

Similarly, *Pale Fire* presents itself as an assemblage of documents: Shade's poem flanked by Kinbote's foreword, commentary, and index. And as Packman recognizes, implicit in this structure is "the key conceit of their potential arrangement in space: one document beside another on a hypothetical surface" (74). In his foreword, Kinbote proposes a reading contract that can help bring into sight this conception of the text as a spatial assemblage of documents. To eliminate inconvenient "back-and-forth leafings" between poem and commentary, he suggests we cut his notes out and clip them together with the appropriate lines of Shade's poem, or place two copies of the text "in adjacent positions on a comfortable table" (25). Couturier singles this passage out as one of those "problematic points of overdetermination" that mark Nabokov's attempt to control the way in which his novel is read. Here, so Couturier argues, Nabokov simply wants to indicate Kinbote's fundamental unreliability as a commentator; he does *not* want his readers to follow Kinbote's directions. Thus Nabokov supplies just enough evidence in the foreword of Kinbote's unreliability (or for many critics, his insanity) that we are likely to reject his 'crazy' proposal and instead read the novel in the more conventional fashion of first page to last. However, if we read disobediently – that is, against the reading contract Nabokov evidently encourages – a different relationship between Shade's and Kinbote's texts emerges. If one were to follow Kinbote's contract, something of the same temporal simultaneity we marked in *House of Leaves* would become apparent – like Johnny's and Zampanò's texts, Shade's poem and Kinbote's commentary are set alongside each other, making explicit the fundamental simultaneity of their texts.

Nabokov's view of reality, and the release from teleological thinking this view entails, undercuts the validity of traditional readings that seek to uncover in *Pale Fire*

a single, controlling presence and a grounding reality – critical approaches Nabokov encouraged through the form of his novel in a bid to limit and control the possible lines of interpretation. That is to say, in the absence of a common reality, Shade's New Wye and Kinbote's Zembla are, necessarily, equally fictional, and in the attendant release from linear time all texts become contemporaneous, and thus also equal. Simply put then, Nabokov's views inadvertently compromise the total control he claims over his text. Recognizing this contradiction, however, does not completely nullify his assertions of control; rather, as demonstrated in the paragraph above, these assertions are re-inscribed within a system they no longer fully dominate.

For Nabokov, his work has meaning only insofar as it approaches totalization, that is, an ideally finished and self-sufficient aesthetic object immune to invasion by rival discourses. And Nabokov's polemic against literary criticism, articulated as a rivalry between the creative writer and critic, finds its fullest expression in the rivalry between Shade's and Kinbote's texts. The relation between 'Pale Fire' and Kinbote's Commentary thus emerges as that of two rival texts locked in a power struggle, each striving to assert the primacy of their representation of reality over that of the other. However, as LeRoy-Frazier rightly argues, "[b]oth are bound to failure, ... for absolute dominance is impossible in a purely textual world devoid of the evaluative standards and hierarchical rankings that would allow one to claim a position of authority and hence a feeling of control over the way events happen" (317). Having analysed Nabokov's failed attempt to achieve complete mastery over his text, I now want to expand my discussion of *Pale Fire* to examine how Shade and Kinbote set about exerting control over their fictions in a textual world bereft of the conditions that make that desired control possible. Focusing on this power struggle also allows us to describe the specific dynamic of the text without becoming bogged down in the debate over who invented whom or which of the novel's two locales is the primary one.

Shade and Totalization

LeRoy-Frazier proposes two common responses to the problem of postmodern time similar to the choice between two bifurcating pathways in a multicursal labyrinth. On the one hand, "[t]he radical freedom into which the individual is plunged when

teleological conceptions of time are removed can constitute a liberating source of creative power in terms of one's ability personally to construct reality" (317). On the other, this freedom can also "be perceived as a source of deep anxiety, for it makes the governing force of the world not individual intitiative [sic], but blind chance"; in these conditions, "[o]ne's experiences no longer seem to be causally connected to one another; things no longer happen according to a logical plan, with a comprehensible end. They merely occur randomly" (318). LeRoy-Frazier focuses mainly on the second of these two responses. Thus she writes:

> While we might seem to have absolute power because we can create order out of the rubble by recombining events at will, such constructs are radically unstable because they are composed of empty signifiers. The created realities have no power over the force of chance, and hence they will always, sooner or later, be displaced. The empty promise of the power to create reality makes us acutely aware of the absence of objective reality, and of the impossibility of fabricating a reliable underlying logic to the course of events. We have no choice, however, but to delude ourselves into believing that there is a means of asserting control; otherwise, the anxiety becomes overwhelming and we risk lapsing into despair at the recognition of our vulnerability (318-19).

Shade and Kinbote, so LeRoy-Frazier argues, suffer from just such an anxiety. Both writers fabricate elaborate textual realities in the hope of imparting a sense of coherence to the confusions and uncertainties of their lives. Yet their constructed realities prove interminably unstable, assemblages of empty signifiers that can never be definitively fixed or stabilized into an immutable order. In a world where the hegemony of chance holds ultimate sway, they are unable to exert control over their fictions or prevent them in turn from being supplemented and displaced by others.

This situation leads Shade to attempt closure in his text, to close it to Kinbote's commentary as Nabokov closes his to rival hermeneutics. And like Nabokov, Shade assumes a position of textual mastery and control over his text. Consequently, he attempts to circumscribe the possibility of supplemental readings that would compromise this position of mastery and the integrity of his text by achieving textual closure or 'totalization'. Moreover, "In constructing his universe," writes LeRoy-

Frazier, "Shade clings to the notion of an extra-textual, objective reality, which his aesthetic universe embodies, orders, and explains" (319). In this section, then, I examine how Shade sets about achieving such closure, and the implications of this drive for closure for the status of his art.

Kinbote's description of the 'Pale Fire' manuscript as it stood at the time of Shade's death gives some indication of the poet's orderly method of composition:

> The manuscript, mostly a Fair Copy, from which the present text has been faithfully printed, consists of eighty medium-sized index cards, on each of which Shade reserved the pink upper line for headings (canto number, date) and used the fourteen light-blue lines for writing out with a fine nib in a minute, tidy, remarkably clear hand, the text of his poem, skipping a line to indicate double space, and always using a fresh card to begin a new Canto (13).

Behind this meticulously transcribed Fair Copy is the Corrected Draft, which due to the poet's sudden death, Kinbote must rely upon to supply the concluding lines (lines 949-999) of Canto Four. Unlike the Fair Copy, Kinbote describes the Corrected Draft as "extremely rough in appearance, teeming with devastating erasures and cataclysmic insertions" (14).

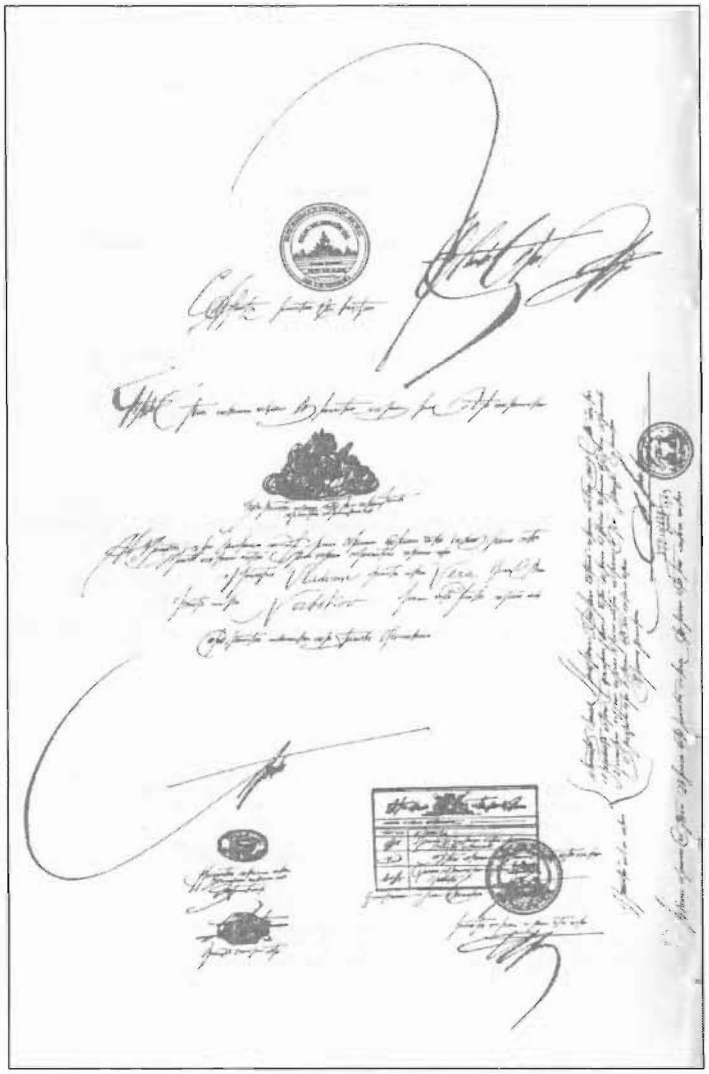
In addition, Kinbote informs us of the existence of a further twelve index cards of variant and supplemental couples. As he explains, it is lucky these drafts have survived:

> As a rule, Shade destroyed drafts the moment he ceased to need them: well do I recall seeing him from my porch, on a brilliant morning, burning a whole stack of them in the pale fire of the incinerator before which he stood with bent head like an official mourner among the wind-borne black butterflies of that backyard auto-da-fé. But he saved those twelve cards because of the unused felicities shining among the dross of used draftings. Perhaps, he vaguely expected to replace certain passages in the Fair Copy with some of the lovely rejections in his files, or, more probably, a sneaking fondness for

> this or that vignette, suppressed out of architectonic considerations ...urged him to put off its disposal till the time when the marble finality of an immaculate typescript would have confirmed it or made the most delightful variant seem cumbersome and impure (15).

To get some idea of what Shade's "draftings" might look like, we may profitably refer here to the work of visual artist Saul Steinberg, and in particular an untitled document he composed for an issue of *TriQuarterly* dedicated to Nabokov's work. This text represents a draft of various illegible inscriptions of which only the artist's signature and the word "Nabokov" can be made out (see figure 2).[7] As David Packman recognizes, this text "suggests an interesting way of approaching a book like *Pale Fire*", since its palimpsestic quality can help to expose the novel's "principles of composition" (73, 74). Specifically, Steinberg's text represents visually the kind of documents Kinbote describes above: incomplete drafts consisting of illegible and overwritten textual inscriptions.

[7] Perceptively, Packman observes that "in Steinberg, as in Nabokov, signatures can be forged, suggesting a vertiginous disjunction between the inscription as indexical sign and the artist's self, which sabotages the notion of the text as self-expression and the author as author-ity" (73).



2: Saul Steinberg's 'Tribute'[8]

In an essay on George Oppen, Michael Davidson coined the term "palimtext" to describe material texts of this kind, suggesting that a "palimtextual study of poetry" should "look not only at the poem in relation to similar poems ... but to the writing each poem displaces, a displacement that is "represented" in the manuscript as a kind of over-writing" ("Palimtexts: Postmodern Poetry and the Material Text" 92). Reading Steinberg and Nabokov intertextually, then, helps bring into focus the specifically "palimtextual" quality of Shade's poem, and his method of composition as a continual over-writing of previous inscriptions as he strives to integrate his divergent drafts and notes into the single, unified text that best expresses his intentions. The reconfiguration of mimesis on this new level allows us a privileged

[8] Steinberg's 'Tribute' appears in *Nabokov: Criticism, Reminiscences, Translation and Tributes*, 332.

view over Shade's shoulder into the dynamic and ongoing process of writing. This focus on the performative act of writing here also implicitly undermines the traditional realist conception of the work as an ostensibly faithful reproduction or mirror-like transcription of a stable, pre-existent reality. Shade's poem refers less to such a reality than it does to other, 'antecedent' texts.

This impulse to control and circumscribe the writing process marks Shade's teleological commitment to the idea of the literary text as a totalized ideal. What is more, Shade's critics, like Nabokov's, seem to share something of a similar commitment. According to Kinbote, one prominent "Shadean" dismisses Shade's final poem because he believes it is merely a mass of "disjointed drafts" incapable of producing "a definite text", and hence unworthy of critical attention (14). With characteristic vanity, Kinbote writes off this judgment as "a malicious invention on the part of those who would wish not so much to deplore the state in which a great poet's work was interrupted by death as to asperse the competence, and perhaps honesty, of its present editor and commentator" (14).

As Michael Wood has demonstrated, Kinbote's tone of "prickly dignity" here echoes that of Borges' narrator in his well-known short story "Pierre Menard, author of *Don Quixote*": "It is as if yesterday we were gathered together before the final marble and the fateful cypresses, and already Error is trying to tarnish [Menard's] Memory" (*The Magician's Doubts* 182). This allusion is significant, since Nabokov's novel and Borges' story are closely interrelated. In both works, a self-important and fussy first-person narrator is intent on correcting what they perceive to be the gross inaccuracies in the prevailing, orthodox critical judgment of a recently deceased writer whose work they claim final authority over. The deceased writers themselves also share certain characteristics, the most significant of which, as Wood points out, is that "Shade like Menard burned his manuscripts once he was done with them, feeding them to "the pale fire of the incinerator" just as Menard used to make "a gay bonfire" of his notebooks" (182). Wood makes an important connection here, although he does not develop its implications in any great length. However, as I hope to demonstrate, Borges's tale helps to bring into focus Shade's preoccupation with the process of achieving textual closure, and particularly his attempts to limit the disseminating

potential of his writing. I therefore offer a brief account of 'Pierre Menard' before discussing how these themes play out in Nabokov's novel.

In Borges' story, Menard sets himself the impossible task of writing certain chapters of *Don Quixote*, not through a mere "mechanical transcription of the original," but from memory he painstakingly produces successive drafts which he ideally hopes will eventually converge "word for word and line for line with those of Miguel de Cervantes" (*Ficciones*, 32). In this pursuit, Menard oscillates between two conflicting inclinations. On the one hand, as a creative writer, he is naturally impelled to "attempt variants of a formal and psychological nature"; on the other hand, his sworn fidelity to Cervantes' text necessitates that he "sacrifice them to the 'original' text and irrefutably to rationalize this annihilation" (34-5). Cervantes' text, then, is the totalized ideal toward which Menard strives; its authority legislates the destruction of all material that departs, however slightly, from its ideal. Accordingly, as "the number of rough drafts kept on increasing, [Menard] tenaciously made corrections and tore up thousands of manuscript pages. He did not permit them to be examined, and he took great care that they would not survive him" (37). Menard's project, then, is founded upon two contradictory impulses that pull in different directions simultaneously. In the process of writing through the *Quixote,* he opens up a rich proliferation of multiple and bifurcating narrative pathways, only to necessarily over-write and displace these pathways in the teleological drive to converge upon the 'ideal' text of Cervantes. Here, the writing process inscribes a fundamental tension, a tension generated through a dynamic of expansion and contraction, accumulation and erasure. Multiple supplements are produced only to be effaced in the effort to coalesce upon a more manageable, singular, and above all *faithful* narrative.

Returning to Nabokov's novel, we see that Shade and Menard share a similar concern. Both writers, in the drive for textual closure, attempt to suppress the disseminating power of their draft materials. Thus Shade, like Menard, burns all trace of antecedent texts after having transcribed them. His Fair Copy manuscript is dated, but as Kinbote points out, Shade has "preserved the date of actual creation rather than that of second or third thoughts" (13), a move that further suppresses the dynamic nature of the writing process. What is important is that the finished product of Shade's writing process is described in terms of a "marble finality" which, as Wood subtly

points out, echoes the "final marble" of Menard's tombstone (182). Therefore, a totalized "Pale Fire" is viewed figuratively as a kind of textual 'death,' a connection reinforced by Kinbote's description of Shade as an "official mourner" with a "bent head" during the ritualized burning of his draft materials (15). Like Menard then, Shade's desire to circumscribe the writing process means his divergent draft materials are 'killed-off,' as it were, once this process is arrested and textual multiplicities are forced to solidify into the marble finality of a finished text. As Packman observes, Shade's poem "is directed toward its own composition, becoming, in essence, the object of desire" (104); but, again like Menard, Shade himself dies with his project unrealized, and his desire for totalization unfulfilled.

For Shade, as for Nabokov, literary production has meaning only insofar as it approaches totalization – that is, an ideally finished and delineated aesthetic object. For only by converting his experience within a seemingly chaotic world into redeeming poetic form can Shade hope to exert a degree of control (illusionary though it be) over the hegemony of chance:

> I feel I understand
> Existence, or at least a minute part
> Of my existence, only through my art,
> In terms of combinational delight;
> And if my private universe scans right,
> So does the verse of galaxies divine
> Which I suspect is an iambic line. (58/971-77)

Thus, Shade values the work-as-product over the work-as-production, which means that (at least from Kinbote's point of view) his finished poem is born into textual death, a marble-like rigor mortis that suppresses the dynamic processes of composition and, by extension, the virtues of supplementarity. Shade's modernist perspective means that he strives to achieve textual mastery through closure, through the creation of a stable and totalized text invulnerable to displacement and supplementation.

On the day of his death, Shade is on the verge of attaining the elusive control he so desires. His poem is within a single line of completion, and according to Kinbote this final line "would have been identical to line 1 and would have completed the symmetry of the structure" (14). However, as LeRoy-Frazier writes, "the possibility of his achieving closure in a textual world is adamantly negated when he fails, in fact to "swing it." Shade's confidence in his ability to produce a mythic or governing representation of the world is revealed as faulty; his desire is doomed to go unfulfilled, for he dies in a chance accident before he can complete his epic" (320). The elaborate design of Shade's poem therefore has notable and rather paradoxical effects. On the one hand, its tight, orderly iambic line and symmetrical structure supports Shade's assumption that just as his poem is more highly structured and orderly than the common, chaotic world of 'everyday reality', correspondingly there is an elegantly structured cosmic order fashioned by some mysterious divine artificer or artificers the existence of which we can only ever accept on faith. On the other hand, "Pale Fire" demonstrates the impossibility of fashioning such a governing representation at all; glimpses of a divine order turn out to be merely "misprints", and even the law of the gods is subject to "topsy-turvical" coincidence. Ironically, Gradus's murder of Shade provides the poet with the "transcendence" he was unable to achieve through the power of his art (LeRoy-Frazier, 321).

In light of this, Kinbote cannot help but read "Pale Fire" with an ominous sense of the poet's impending death. Thus, in his commentary he meticulously synchronizes the composition of Shade's poem with Gradus's gradual approach to New Wye:

> [Gradus's] departure for Western Europe, with a sordid purpose in his heart and a loaded gun in his pocket, took place on the very day that an innocent poet in an innocent land was beginning Canto Two of *Pale Fire*. We shall accompany Gradus in constant thought, as he makes his way from distant dim Zembla to green Appalachia, though the entire length of the poem, following the road of its rhythm, riding past in a rhyme, skidding around the corner of a run-on, breathing with the caesura, swinging down to the foot of the page from line to line as from branch to branch, hiding between two words ... reappearing on the horizon of a new canto, steadily marching nearer in iambic motion, crossing streets, moving up with his valise on the escalator of the

> pentameter, stepping off, boarding a new train of thought, entering the hall of a hotel, putting out the bedlight, while Shade blots out a word, and falling asleep as the poet lays down his pen for the night (65).

These two narrative lines converge in Kinbote's note on the poem's final, unwritten line (an ironic repetition of the first line: "I was the shadow of the waxwing slain") where he recounts the circumstances of Shade's tragic encounter with Gradus. Kinbote's synchronization emphasizes some fundamental connection between the composition of "Pale Fire" and the approach of the Zemblan assassin; as his commentary unfolds it appears as if "the force propelling [Gradus to New Wye] is the magic action of Shade's poem itself, the mechanism and sweep of verse, the powerful iambic motor. Never before has the inexorable advance of fate received such a sensuous form." (110).

Much criticism of *Pale Fire* has interpreted this synchronization as merely evidence of Kinbote's rampant paranoia, his mania for establishing correlations between the circumstances of his own life and those of Shade's poem. Such readings, however, are wholly reductive, and overlook an important implication of Kinbote's pervasive patterning. The arrival of Gradus is, I suggest, the *necessary* outcome of Shade's writing project. Here we can profitably refer to Elizabeth Ermarth's account of Derrida's ideas of structure and play:

> To the extent that a structure limits play in the interest of closure, precision, or "perfection," it becomes "ruined" because its very completeness – its "totalization" – uses up its options to the point that no new formulations, no new experiments or adventures are possible. By contrast, the incompleteness of living systems guarantees a continuation because the possibility of play remains open. In other words, and not to put too fine a point on it, systems that seek to exclude play are also seeking death (*Sequel to History* 148).

Literary structures, then, which limit play for the sake of closure, are petrified and lifeless, whereas incomplete structures contain play and therefore remain vital and dynamic. For Ermarth, (and also, as we have seen, for Danielewski), the process of supplementarity is essential to the vitality of incomplete systems. Supplementarity

ensures that "a fixed system or syntax is perpetually renewed by the necessity of substitution: substitution of one term, one experiment, one improvisation after another as dictated by some irreducible ambiguity in the system of signs. This supplementarity ... prevents the system from being totalized and "ruined" (148-49).

It is from this perspective that we can begin to understand the role Gradus plays in the novel. Shade, despite valuing "texture" over "text," circumscribes his writing process in the interest of closure and totalization. He integrates his divergent draft material into a single, fixed poetic structure, and thereby reduces the possibility of play, the possibility of "new experiments or adventures." Therefore it is possible to suggest – provided one accepts the concept of the self as a text – that Shade is in some sense writing his own death. In this reading, it is no accident that the movements of Gradus – the embodiment of death in the novel – are in perfect harmony with the poem's composition, or that he murders Shade at the exact moment his poem reaches a point of totalization. That is to say, Gradus's approach literalizes the fact that the desire for textual totalization is also a desire for death. Packman, drawing on the concepts and terminology of Deleuze, has shown that Gradus is less a distinct character within the novel's projected fictional world(s) and more a self-reflexive device. As he observes, Gradus's trajectory through the poem deflects attention away from traditional novelistic representation by laying bare the workings of the Shade's "literary machine." Gradus is, then, "no flesh-and-blood creature but rather a literary mechanism" (83), the iambic motor that propels Shade's literary machine forward in its drive toward totalization and consequently "death, the end of the line" (85).

Whereas Shade hedges his text against the encroachment of Kinbote's commentary, the narrators of *House of Leaves* are much less resistant to the process of supplementarity and the crucial role it plays in the perpetual renewal of language systems. This becomes evident if we compare the different status accorded to incompleteness in both works. Like "Pale Fire," Zampanò's 'The Navidson Record' is an incomplete text, a chaotic palimpsest of overwritten and displaced inscriptions. But whereas this represents the failure of Shade's bid for textual closure or totalization, Zampanò's deliberately incomplete novel generously accommodates any number of supplemental readings. Teeming with aporias and contradictions, Zampanò's text

demonstrates how the gaps in real history become serendipitous occasions for appropriation and invention. Examining a particularly fragmentary section of the manuscript, Johnny notes that "Zampanò provided the blanks but never filled them in" (63); elsewhere he observes that "[s]ome kind of ash landed on the following pages, in some places burning away small holes, in other places eradicating large chunks of text" (323). In the process of editing the manuscript, Johnny fills in these gaps, decides whether to "resurrect" deletions, and arbitrates between variant readings of the same passages (111). He actively completes or supplements the gaps with his own texts, taking Zampanò's words as a catalyst for his own improvised textual performances and adventures. And it is this process of supplementarity, this potential interminable substitution of one experiment after another, which prevents Zampanò's text from sinking into sterility and textual death.

The "dialogical tension" produced by *Pale Fire*'s special poem-and-commentary structure dramatizes two radically different attitudes toward textual closure (Packman, 77). If Shade's project is to suppress the unruly complexity of his drafts by smoothing away divergent readings into a single, closed poem, Kinbote's reading and commentary inverts this work by, as it were, exhuming and resuscitating the latent supplementarity that lies buried beneath the final marble of Shade's totalized text. The struggle for control played out in the novel manifests itself in these two competing impulses, and as we shall see, this conflict remains unresolved, since neither writer is able to assert total control over the other in a purely textual world.

Kinbote and Supplementarity

Like Navidson's endlessly shifting labyrinth, which grows and shrinks in response to the individual's mental state, Zampanò's text grows and shrinks according to Johnny's desire, as he literally constructs the text in ways that foreground some elements of the assemblage while suppressing others. Thus 'The Navidson Record,' pieced together from a thousand disparate fragments, is as much Johnny's production as it is Zampanò's. Moreover, Johnny freely modifies Zampanò's text in order to make it conform more nearly to his own experiences, and these interventions radically destabilize the authenticity and integrity of 'The Navidson Record,' since we have no way of ascertaining which sections of the manuscript he has tampered with and which

are faithfully reproduced. In short, Johnny's commentary and Zampanò's text are so thoroughly enmeshed that notions of 'originality' and 'authenticity' are altogether undercut. As Danielewski remarks, there is no "sacred" or authoritative text in *House of Leaves*, since at every level of the novel some form of intervention is taking place (see "Haunted House" 121).

Kinbote's commentary, which functions as an extended supplement to Shade's poem, enters into a similarly ambiguous relationship with its 'source.' Shade cannot achieve total control of his text; in its unfinished state, it remains open as Zampanò's does to supplementation and displacement. Kinbote relates in his commentary how he urgently pressed upon Shade his fabulous Zemblan narrative in the hope that the poet would commemorate this story in verse. Shade, of course, had no such intention, as a disappointed Kinbote learns on first reading "Pale Fire":

> I sped through it, snarling, as furious young heir through an old deceiver's testament. Where were the battlements of my sunset castle? Where was Zembla the Fair? Where her spine of mountains? Where her long thrill through the mist? ... Nothing of it was there! The complex contribution I had been pressing upon him with a hypnotist's patience and a lover's urge was simply not there. Oh, but I cannot express the agony! Instead of the wild glorious romance – what did I have? An autobiographical, eminently Appalachian, rather old-fashioned narrative in a neo-Popian prosodic style – beautifully written of course – Shade could not write otherwise than beautifully – but void of my magic, of that special rich streak of magical madness which I was sure would run through it and make it transcend its time (232-33).

On a second, closer reading however, Kinbote begins to detect what he takes to be tenuous signs of his influence:

> Gradually I regained my usual composure, I reread *Pale Fire* more carefully. I liked it better when expecting less. And what was that? What was that dim distant music, those vestiges of color in the air? Here and there I discovered in

> it and especially, especially in the invaluable variants, echoes and spangles of my mind, a long ripplewake of my glory (233).

Thus, in reading the 'finished' poem alongside the rejected variants, Kinbote makes it seem as if, initially at least, Shade really did take the Zemblan story as his subject, which now exists as a kind of submerged or over-written story underlying the final text. In Kinbote's account then, his text – far from being merely parasitic – in fact emerges as the progenitor of Shade's poem, the primary text to which the poem owes its very existence. The variant material Shade tried so hard to suppress allows Kinbote to, as it were, read 'beneath' the surface of the poem, to detect in it the Zemblan story he hoped to find on his first reading, in the same way Johnny restored various struck-out passages so as to read his own story into Zampanò's text. In this way, Kinbote seeks to assert the historical primacy of his text, and his representation of reality, over that of Shade's poem.

Kinbote attempts to exert control over Shade's poem by proving that his Zemblan story is in fact the 'source': "My commentary to this poem, now in the hands of my readers, represents an attempt to sort out those echoes and wavelets of fire, and pale phosphorescent hints, and all the many subliminal debts to me" (233). Kinbote's references here to "wavelets of fire" and "pale phosphorescent hints" recalls the "pale fire" of the incinerator in which Shade ritually destroyed his draft materials as he strove to totalize his poem and thus render it immune to invasion by Kinbote's rival text. Here, Kinbote quite explicitly figures these destroyed drafts as the Zemblan material of which Shade's final text "has been deliberately and drastically drained of every trace" (67). Kinbote therefore seeks to bring into view again this suppressed supplemental profusion. In his commentary, he reproduces what variant readings have survived, and forms from these the base material upon which he hangs his larger Zemblan supplement, his story of Charles Xavier. Thus, although he may appear to be a self-motivated, autonomous subject, his agency is to a large degree dependent upon his interaction with Shade's text; his self-image, as well as our perception of him, is in fact born out of the contestation of two divergent agencies as they are played out in the textual space of Shade's poem.

Like Kinbote and Shade, Johnny and Zampanò are also locked in a struggle for textual control, each trying to assert mastery over the other. However, as we have seen, this relationship is inherently unstable; both writers keep shifting and changing their respective positions in an endless game of musical chairs. Danielewski gives this volatile relationship concrete expression in the image of the brass-bull torture device. Paradoxically enough, Johnny and Zampanò are figured simultaneously as the bull encapsulating the other, and the victim encapsulated by the other. In this configuration, the desired control slips elusively back and forth between the two; neither one is able to finally position themselves as the source of the other's words.

The dynamic of transference figured here finds its analogue in the Shakespearean sun-and-moon imagery of Nabokov's novel, which figures forth the complex transferential relationship between Kinbote and Shade and their respective texts. This imagery appears in the second, crucial supplement Kinbote introduces into his commentary, a variant reading of lines 39-40 of Shade's poem: "... and home would haste my thieves, / The sun with stolen ice, the moon with leaves" (66). Kinbote correctly identifies these lines as an allusion to Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens*, coincidentally the only book he has with him in his isolated log cabin. Since this copy is a Zemblan poetical translation by his uncle Conmal, Kinbote is forced to retranslate the appropriate passage back into English rather than cite directly from the original:

> The sun is a thief: she lures the sea
> and robs it. The moon is a thief:
> he steals his silvery light from the sun.
> The sea is a thief: it dissolves the moon (66).

Although Kinbote hopes this translation "sufficiently approximates the text, or is at least faithful to its spirit" (66), it is, of course, hilariously inept when compared to the fluency and power of Shakespeare's original:

> The sun's a thief, and with his great attraction
> Robs the vast sea; the moon's an arrant thief,
> And her pale fire she snatches from the sun;
> The sea's a thief, whose liquid surge resolves

The moon into salt tears. (IV. iii. 432-36)

For Borges, 'original' texts may be considered inferior or unfaithful to their translations, insofar as translations are able to bring out and realize possibilities only latent in the 'original.' In this reading, all texts are simply drafts-in-progress that gesture toward some meaning they can never fully realize[9]. If we apply this reasoning to Kinbote's "retranslated translation" (Patrick O'Donnell, "Watermark" 390), then, it is possible to suggest that it is in fact superior to the original since, despite its lackluster, galumphing rhythm, it partakes of or enacts the process of which Shakespeare's 'original' merely speaks.

More importantly for our purposes, however, is the implicit negation here of any notion of textual 'origin' or 'source'. *Pale Fire* criticism has normally interpreted this metaphor as a description of the supposedly dubious relationship between poem and commentary. In this reading, Shade and Kinbote are as sun and moon to each other; just as the moon steals its light from the sun, Kinbote's farcical commentary steals its "opalescent light" from the "fiery orb" of Shade's poem, positioned here as the source text from which Kinbote's narrative represents an aberrant deviation (67). But its implications extend much further than that. As Patrick O'Donnell recognises, the Shakespearean metaphor "suggests that there is no "authoritative" text in *Pale Fire*, no ultimate fount or source of significance, just as in nature there is no beginning to the cycle that transfers power from sun to moon to sea and back again" (391). Similar then to the brass bull image in *House of Leaves*, this Shakespearean metaphor implies that neither Shade nor Kinbote can claim a position of authority as the source of the other's words. Rather, as LeRoy-Frazier points out, their "relationship is constantly in flux," so that like Johnny and Zampanò, "it is impossible to claim that Shade is always Kinbote's creator, or that Kinbote is always Shade's. Both propositions are always true: Shade and Kinbote are each others' creators" (326).

This is possible because the logic of the supplement short-circuits the binary distinction between primary text and secondary text, origin and image, so that both terms enter into an undecidable play and exchange of attributes. Since – as Derrida

[9] See Hayles "Translating Media" 268, and Efrain Kristal *Invisible Work: Borges and Translation.*

has shown – there is no escaping from the "logic of supplementarity", recourse to origins or sources is impossible. Consequently, and to reiterate, it becomes impossible to place texts in an historical order; in a textual world, all fictions are effectively contemporaneous and equal. Thus, as O'Donnell argues,

> every text in *Pale Fire* – Foreword, Poem, Commentary, and Index – is supplementary to the others, a corruption and thieflike translation. The novel enacts what Jacques Derrida, in an analysis of the differences between writing and speech, cites as a mythical instance of "supplementarity" evidenced by the story of the Egyptian god of writing, Thoth: "As the god of language second and of linguistic difference, Thoth can become the god of the creative word only by metonymic substitution, by historical displacement, and sometimes by violent subversion ... This type of substitution thus puts Thoth *in Ra's place* as the moon takes the place of the sun. The god of writing thus supplies the place of Ra, supplementing him and supplanting him in his absence and essential disappearance. Such is the origin of the moon as supplement to the sun, of night light as supplement to daylight" (391-92).

Thus, refracted through the lens of Derrida's notion of the supplement, Nabokov's novel again uncannily mirrors *House of Leaves*, since Danielewski explicitly draws on these Derridean ideas (along with the brass bull image) to describe the cyclical game of metonymic substitution that Johnny and Zampanò are caught up in. On the one hand, Zampanò creates Johnny as the son or "sun" (542) who will inherit and complete his unfinished manuscript; on the other hand, Johnny supplants and supplements Zampanò in taking the old man's place after his death, and there is a sense in which he in turn creates Zampanò by editing 'The Navidson Record' into a coherent document.

Seen from this perspective, Nabokov's authorship tease, which, as we have seen, has locked *Pale Fire* criticism into a line of inquiry that only serves to reinforce his control over the text, is rendered null and void, since it is impossible and thus pointless trying to fix either Shade or Kinbote as the controlling, authoritative voice of the novel. Rather, their respective texts, like those of Johnny and Zampanò, endlessly reflect and mirror each other; in a textual world neither one is finally able to assert

dominance and control over the other. LeRoy-Frazier succinctly sums up the situation thus:

> *Pale Fire* ... portrays a postmodern world in which there are no rules – with the exception of chance – and any search for individual autonomy is revealed as an illusionary conquest. Although one is free to create one's own personal reality, one cannot claim a stable, essential identity that is not both anticipated and reflected somehow in that of another. Even the possibility of self-definition through difference is eliminated when the self is recognized as a text that endlessly reflects and is reflected by other texts. Only in terms of artificially positing one's own text, however unoriginal, as hierarchically superior to others' texts can one fabricate a sense of autonomy and control – an autonomy that is eventually negated by the hegemony of chance in a random world (323).

Little wonder, then, that "definitive" critical readings intent on elevating one author over the other have proven so unstable and reversible. The decision to assign control to either Shade or Kinbote is an ultimately undecidable and hence arbitrary one. The very structure of this *aporia* guarantees the impossibility of a definitive, total answer; therefore, critical interpretations aimed at solving the attribution problem once and for all are destined for failure. The novel simply cannot compel a required or necessary reading of itself.

Nevertheless, Boyd argues against those who suggest the problem of authorship is finally unsolvable:

> [some critics] maintain that Nabokov undermines the apparent dual authorship but deliberately leaves the attribution question unresolved, so that while there is evidence that *either* Shade *or* Kinbote could have written the whole, the reader, like someone looking at the perceptual psychologists' pet image, now sees duck, now rabbit, but cannot settle on a single stable response (114).

For Boyd, Nabokov is very much in control of every element of his text; there *is* a correct interpretation to this problem waiting to be discovered by his most persistent

and dedicated readers. What Boyd fails to recognize is that the very structure of the novel undermines any definitive answer to this question, such that Nabokov's novel becomes a perceptual psychologists' image despite itself. Moreover, as LeRoy-Frazier points out, "by denying the validity of other possible readings of the novel and fixing his own immutably correct formulation, Boyd's criticism itself "closes off the play" of interpretation and re-enacts that same teleological preoccupation Derrida posits as one typical response to the postmodern world" (324), a response which, like Shade's teleological drive for closure, is bound to fail. Nevertheless, in his *Magic of Artistic Discovery*, Boyd believes he has finally cracked the novel's secret. In this new reading, Boyd argues that Shade is the controlling voice of the text, effectively composing both poem and commentary, the latter by exerting a ghostly influence over Kinbote. Ironically, then, Boyd's insistence on ghostly possessions (Shade's possession by Hazel's ghost and, in turn, Kinbote's possession by Shade), only serves to expand and accentuate *Pale Fire*'s transferential drama.

Conclusion

> In fact, there is no translation, it is transformation. You really have to betray the novel in order to be faithful to it.
>
> – David Cronenberg on the process of adapting a novel to the screen. [10]

Like so many of Nabokov's exegetes, Boyd offers a reductive, normalized, and overly pious interpretation of *Pale Fire*. Like so many others, he attempts to dispel the intolerable sense of indeterminacy he finds in the novel by affixing to it a final, immutably correct interpretation, and as such misconstrues the true value and richness of the Nabokovian legacy or "inheritance." For as Derrida has argued,

> The radical and necessary heterogeneity of an inheritance ... is never fully gathered ... Its presumed unity, if there is one, can only consist in the *injunction to reaffirm by choosing*. You must filter, select, criticise; you must sort out among several of the possibilities which inhabit the same injunction ... in contradictory fashion around a secret. [For] if the legibility of a legacy

[10] Cited in John Doggett Williams, "David Cronenberg on *Spider*".

> was given, natural, transparent, univocal; if it did not simultaneously call for and defy interpretation, one could never inherit from it. One would be affected by it as by a cause – natural or genetic. One always inherits a secret which says: 'Read me, will you ever be up to it?' (cited in Keith Jenkins, *Refiguring History* 29).

As an inheritance, *Pale Fire* demands to be read, and thus a decision must be made on how to approach the novel critically, whether to take its apparent structure at face value or unify the text by refiguring it as the product of a single narrative voice. However, this crucial interpretive decision remains undecidable, always in a state of play, since there is no solid ground upon which to arbitrate between the two options. The very undecidability of the interpretive process ensures that we will *always* fail to get Nabokov's text under control, ensures that we will *always* get it 'wrong'. And this situation allows us the freedom to read the novel in ways it never intended to allow. Here, creative freedom lies in failure, in the impossibility of ever closing off the play of the text. Indeed, for Derrida it is this very freedom to read texts creatively, imaginatively, and disobediently that constitutes an actual "reading" of them at all, as opposed to an obedient, passive description. Derrida's ethics of reading suggests that we should read texts as disobediently as possible, so that we may open them up beyond their own attempted closures and thereby pave the way for endlessly new, innovative interpretations.

Paradoxically, then, like Johnny's reading of Zampanò's text and Kinbote's reading of Shade's, fully engaging with the Nabokovian text means adopting a creative and irreverent approach that departs from its subject so as to more faithfully preserve its spirit. What I have tried to do in this chapter, then, is produce a kind of "Danielewskian" reading of Nabokov by positioning *House of Leaves* as a supplement to *Pale Fire*, with supplement understood here in the strict Derridean sense: Danielewski's novel repeats, reiterates, and completes Nabokov's book at the same time as it shatters the integrity of the "original" text. In this way, Danielewski's novel helps to throw into sharp relief the points of instability latent in *Pale Fire*'s special form, and thereby move that text beyond its author-determined point of closure and open it up to a future-directed process of interpretation wherein the reader is free is discover or produce new and innovative readings. To this end, I have structured my

thesis in *imitation or mimicry* of the compositional structuration of the novels themselves, reading *House of Leaves* first and reflecting that work back onto the Nabokov's earlier text. For as we have seen, all texts in the intertextual network are essentially contemporary with one another, a situation that allows us to position texts in ever new and interesting configurations.

By way of conclusion, I would like to quote one of John Cage's mesostic poems from his book *Composition in Retrospect*. As practiced by Cage, the mesostic form is similar to that of an acrostic only the vertically spelled word is down the middle instead of the side, and the words making up the poem are invariably drawn from a source text. Similar to William Burroughs's "cut-up" technique, Cage uses mesostics as a way of re-reading canonical modernist texts, as a kind of Ariadne's thread for tracing his own singular readings through such overtly labyrinthine texts as Pound's *Cantos* and Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*. The following mesostic, then, forms a particular apt way to lead out my own singular reading through Nabokov's prison-labyrinth (the mesostic word here is IMITATION):

the past must be Invented
the future Must be
revIsed
doing boTh
mAkes
whaT
the present Is
discOvery
Never stops

Conclusion

Critical analyses of *Pale Fire* have consistently focused on Nabokov's struggle to assert control over his text. Nowhere is this more evident than in considering the problem of authorship in the novel. Many correspondences can be identified between the texts attributed to Shade and Kinbote, and this has raised questions as to whether the two figures are indeed the authors of their respective texts, or whether both poem and commentary are in fact the work of a single author. The text itself remains unyielding in response to this riddle. Nabokov's authorial conundrum therefore rests unresolved within the fabric of the novel. Critics intent on uncovering *Pale Fire's* 'authentic' authorial voice, and thus discovering the 'true' meaning of the novel, are therefore left looking to Nabokov for clues. Of course, such an interpretive methodology assumes that a definitive answer itself exists, that Nabokov did indeed ordain some singular authoritative meaning for the text. And this is precisely what the author wants. Nabokov constructs his novel as a sealed 'black box' closed to readerly interpretation, thereby affirming his own tyranny as the novel's supreme authorial force. In this reading, then, Nabokov's novel is fundamentally author-directed.

However, as I have argued, reading *Pale Fire* through the lens of *House of Leaves* allows for a radical renegotiation of the Nabokovian text. In contrast to Nabokov's ostensibly restrictive author-directed text, Danielewski's novel is expressly reader-orientated. The reader is openly invited to enter the labyrinthine textual space of *House of Leaves* and participate in the 'meaning-making' process. Here meaning is unfixed and mutable. Rather than searching for some predetermined authorial intent, the reader is encouraged to supplement and re-inscribe Zampanò's already extensively annotated manuscript, actively bringing their own voice(s) to bear on the text, thus endlessly transforming Danielewski's open-ended project. Readerly projection emerges as the novel's primary concern.

Jill LeRoy-Frazier, whose ideas I drew upon in my discussion of Nabokov, is one of the few critics to have rigorously applied post-structuralist ideas to *Pale Fire*. The

implicitly negative thrust of her argument however, tends to obscure the potentially liberating implications of the Derridean ideas of language on which she draws. For her, our inability to achieve control in a textual world is seen predominantly as a source of deep anxiety. Thus Danielewski's novel provides the perfect corrective lens through which to read *Pale Fire*, since he is much more sanguine about the instability of language constructs than LeRoy-Frazier is. For Danielewski (as indeed for Derrida), in the recognition of language's instability and hence the interminable undecidability of the interpretive process lies the promise of ever-new textual possibilities and adventures still to come in the openness of an untotalized future. Danielewski therefore fills his text with gaps and aporias, generously inviting the reader to attach any personal meaning to it they see fit. And in direct contrast to Nabokov, this invitation extends even to the attribution of authorship:

> [one question *House of Leaves* poses is] whether or not the novel can be seen as having a single dominant voice creating all the others, and if so, identifying that voice. In short: who really is the originator of this book? ... But I'm not going to answer because for me to move further and further into the narrative details would require me to begin to deprive readers of the private joys of making such a *discovery* on their own ("Haunted House" 115).

This is not the discovery of something *in* the text, but rather the reader's discovery of their own imbrication in the process of meaning-making, their ability to write and rewrite the text, to freely position any of its three main narrators as the novel's dominant voice. Thus the relationship between Danielewski's novel and the reader is less inflexible and authoritarian, and more open and dynamic than that of *Pale Fire*. While Nabokov strives for closure and textual mastery, Danielewski constructs his novel in such a way as to ensure that meaning is produced and realized only in the interaction between reader and book, and thus always in process, provisional, and open to perpetual revision. Far from attempting to fix one authoritative meaning, Danielewski invites the reader to freely supplement the text with his or her own words. As he says in the *Critique* interview: "The way that Johnny projects himself into, or onto, Zampanò's book shows how the text of

'The Navidson Record' functions as it is being read and assembled by the readers themselves. Johnny even goes so far as to modify it. Not only does the book permit that, it is really saying to the reader, "Now *you* modify it"" ("Haunted House" 120). Meaning slides elusively back and forth between reader and book, and it is through this process of supplementarity, this interminable substitution of one experiment, one improvisation after another, that Danielewski's hopes will prevent his novel from becoming 'totalized' and thus solidifying into immobility and textual death.

Conversely, Nabokov strives to totalize his text, to render it immune to invasion by other rival texts. What Shute calls "the battle for the last word" (642) forms both the subject matter as well as the central structuring principle of the novel. In a sense, then, *Pale Fire* has suffered a kind of textual death; Nabokov's authorship tease, which has set the terms in which *Pale Fire* continues to be read today, only serves to reinforce his control over the text. What is more, criticism has been at least partially successful in domesticating *Pale Fire*'s excesses and idiosyncrasies. This much at least is clear: the critical debate of who invented whom is now fully exhausted. Thus if Nabokov's novel is to remain a vital and relevant text, different interpretive strategies must now come into play. Mark Danielewski's *House of Leaves*, seen here as a post-modern, poststructuralist repetition or iteration of *Pale Fire*, provides a valuable lens through which to re-interpret Nabokov's novel, and thus give to it a new life or 'after-life' beyond both Nabokov's authorial tyranny and the attempted closures of the normative, complicit criticism. *House of Leaves* can help bring into focus the aporias or points of undecidability latent in the special poem-and-commentary structure of Nabokov's novel, and thus open the text up and prepare it for endlessly new, innovative, and disobedient readings. This approach might be what Deleuze calls "counter-effectuation": "to be the mime of what effectively occurs, to double the actualisation with a counter actualisation, the identification with a distance, like the true actor or dancer, is to give to the truth of the event the only chance of not being confused with its inevitable actualisation" (*The Logic of Sense* 161). In the *House of Leaves*-inflected reading offered here, the textual knots and contradictions of *Pale Fire* are not smoothed over, but accentuated, repeated, and highlighted, so that Nabokov's novel becomes its own 'double'. And it is in this space, the space opened up

here between the event and its counter-effectuated double that allows Nabokov's novel to finally resemble itself.

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